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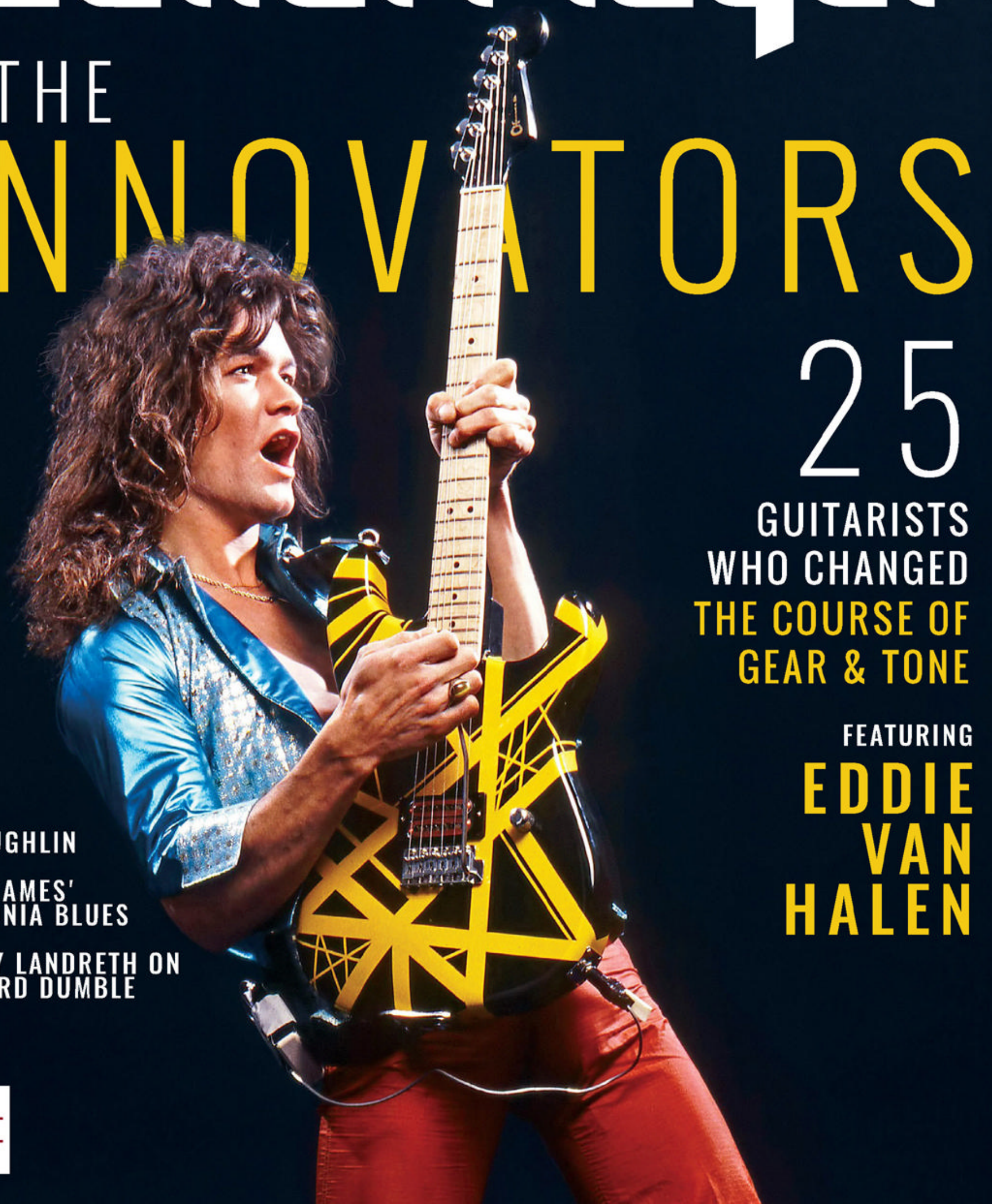


25 GUITARISTS WHO CHANGED THE COURSE OF GEAR & TONE

FEATURING

EDDIE VAN HALEN

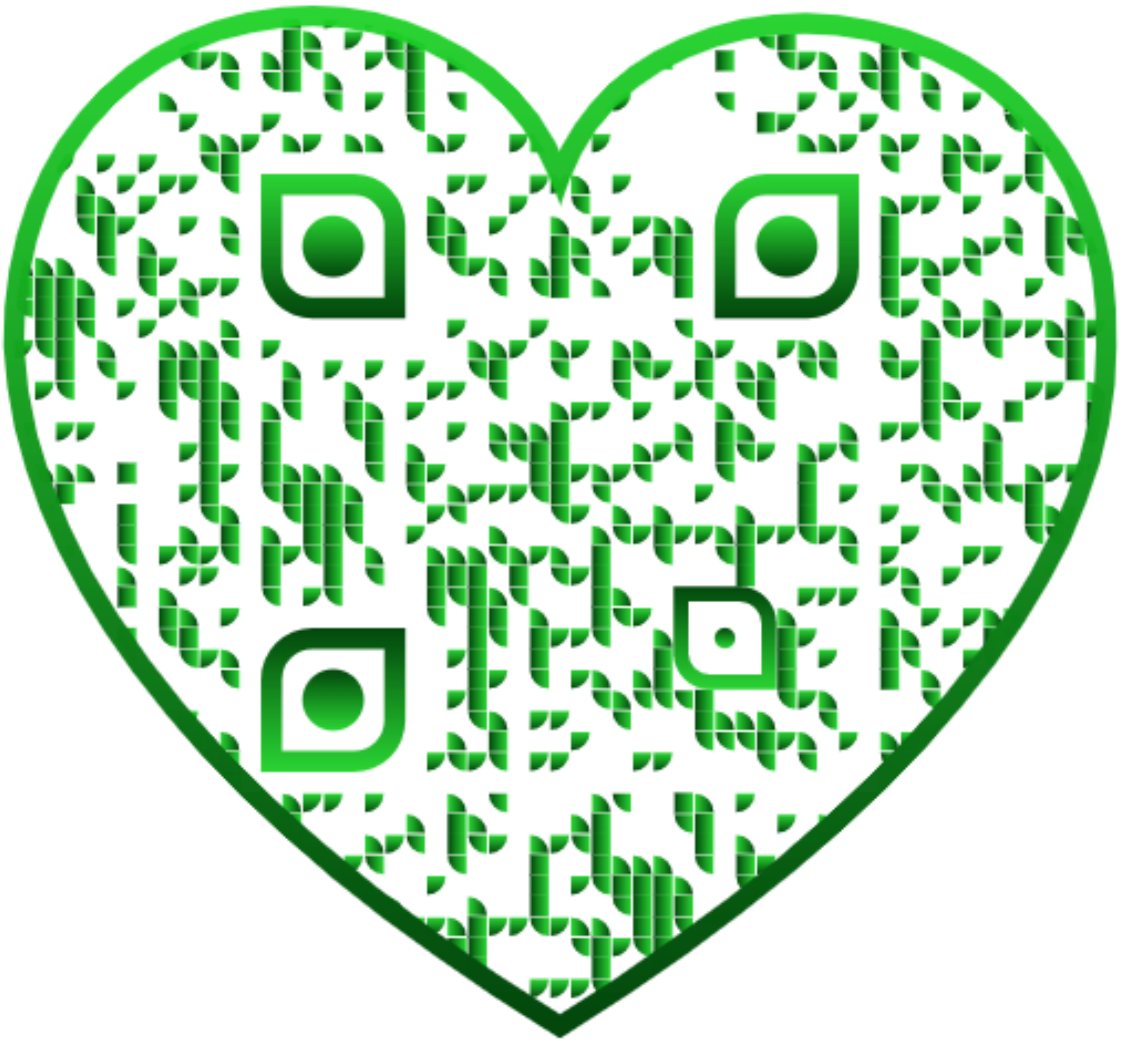
+

JOHN McLAUGHLIN

SKIP JAMES' BENTONIA BLUES

SONNY LANDRETH ON HOWARD DUMBLE

FUTURE



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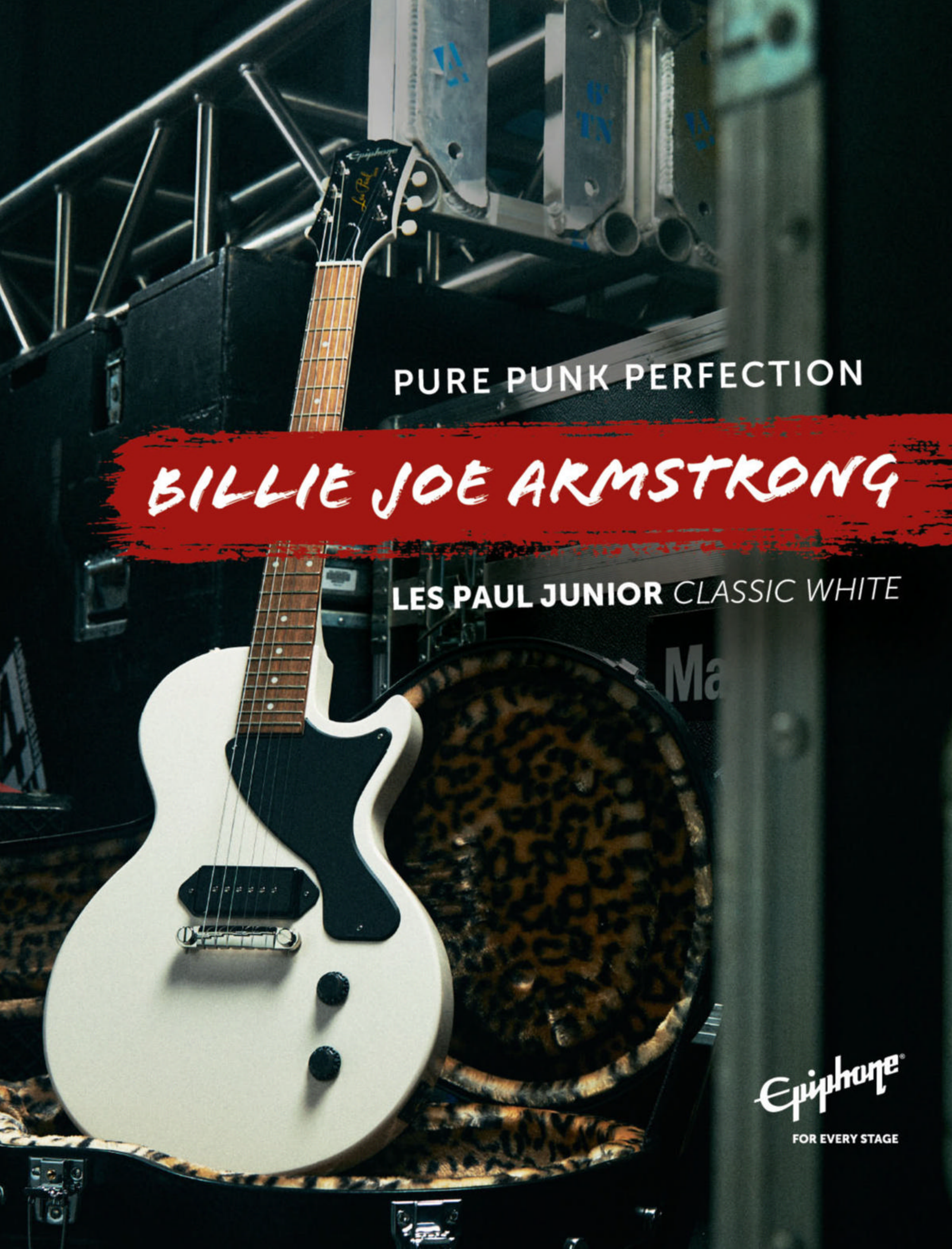
PURE PUNK PERFECTION
BILLIE JOE ARMSTRONG
LES PAUL JUNIOR CLASSIC WHITE
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GETTING INTO GEAR

WE TEND TO celebrate performers in these pages, but innovations in gear have been the principle drivers in the development and evolution of music. Prior to the 18th century, the harpsichord was the instrument most used by composers in Europe, but its volume range and articulation were limited. Around 1700, Bartolomeo Cristofori invented the pianoforte. Cristofori put his instrument's selling point in its name, which means *soft-loud*. The new colors offered by the pianoforte completely changed music composition by giving composers and performers new means of expression. Pianos could be built large enough to be heard within an ensemble, allowing orchestras and concert halls to become larger. The concept of music, and piano's role in it, were forever altered.

The guitar underwent a similar evolution in the 1930s when the pickup and amplification allowed it to be heard over the competing instruments of the orchestra. As with the pianoforte, it allowed new ways of artistic expression, and in the hands of artists like Charlie Christian and artist-inventors like Les Paul, the electric guitar became a lead instrument. The 50 years that followed were a veritable blur of invention and musical evolution, as innovations in guitar, amps and effects opened fresh avenues of expression and guitar overtook piano's role in popular music.

What's evident is that innovations in music matter only as much as musicians put them to use. As we note in this issue, the talk box has been around since the late 1930s and was used on several hit country records. But it didn't mean a thing to electric guitarists until Joe Walsh squawked with one all over his 1973 blues-rock hit, "Rocky Mountain Way." In that respect, the artists are as vital to music's development as the innovators. In this issue, we celebrate 25 of them — including a few who are themselves gear innovators.

Coincidentally, as we were creating this issue, the music world lost one of its legendary amp builders when Howard Alexander Dumble passed away on January 16, according to the Stanislaus County Coroner's office. Alexander grew up in Bakersfield, California, and took an interest in guitar and electronic equipment early in his life. It was those twin passions that served as the foundation for his extraordinary career. Blessed with a keen ear, he began building guitar amps in the early to mid 1960s, fine-tuning their performance to the instruments, pedals and playing style of the artists who enthusiastically embraced them, including David Lindley, Lowell George, Bonnie Raitt, Larry Carlton, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Eric Johnson, Robben Ford and slide master Sonny Landreth, who pays respects to his friend in this issue.

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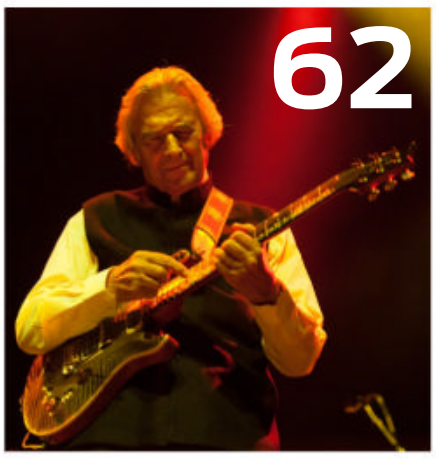
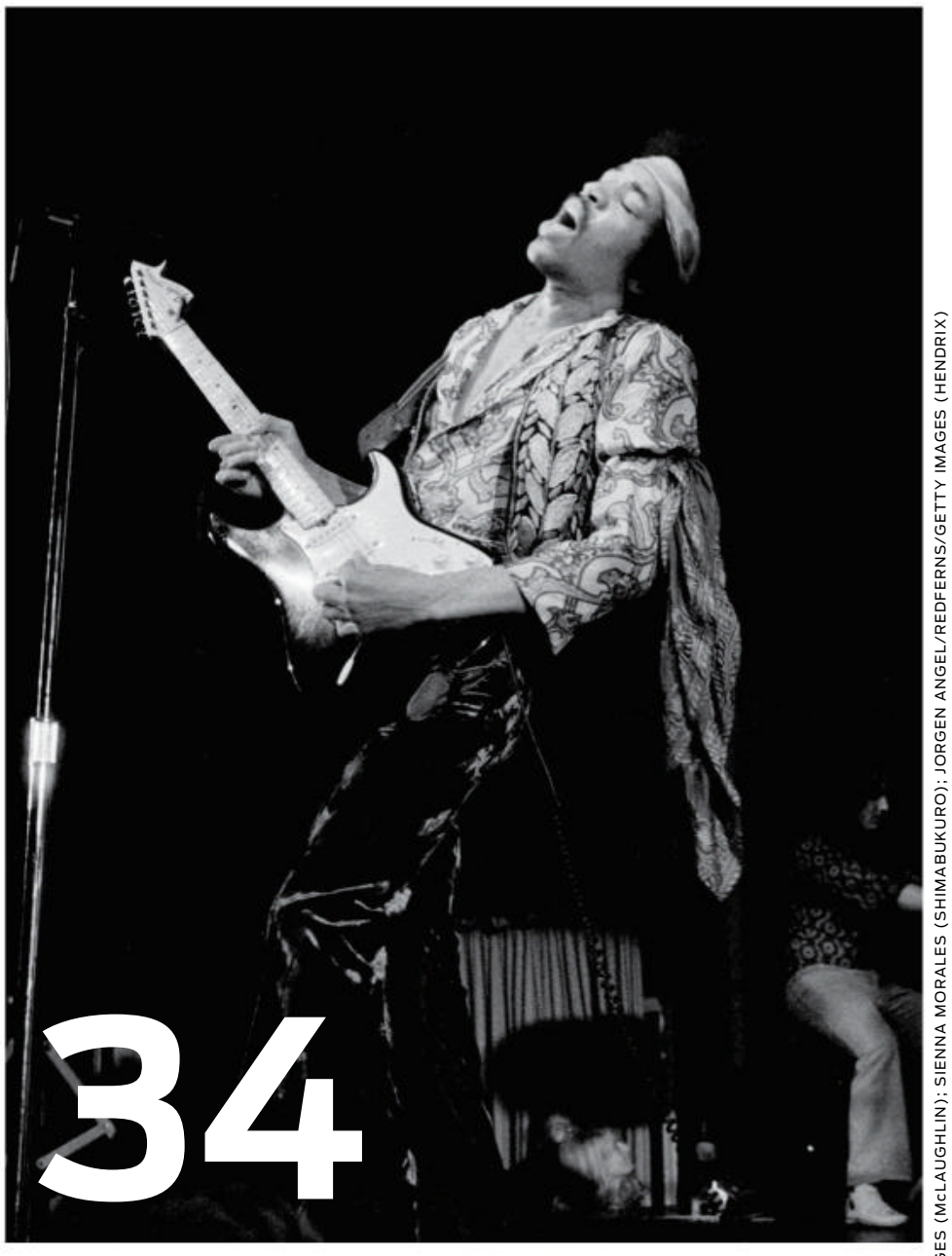
Eddie Van Halen, 1978, by Neil Zlozower/AtlasIcons.com





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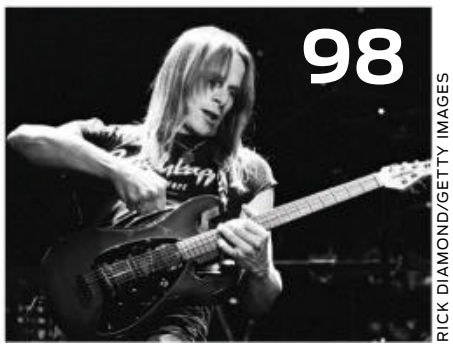

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TOP HONORS

With its non-contoured body, age-checked finish and 1/2 Blender wiring, the Fender Custom Shop Limited-Edition Double-Bound Stratocaster Journeyman Relic is in a class of its own.

BY ART THOMPSON

A WELL-CARED-FOR GUITAR that shows the "patina of age, with finish checking, oxidation on the metal parts, and discoloration of the plastic." That's how Fender describes a Journeyman Relic instrument in its extensive line of Custom Shop made-to-order guitars. This is precisely the spirit in which Fender and Guitar Center have collaborated on the Limited-Edition Double-Bound Stratocaster Journeyman Relic, a guitar that has been carefully massaged to walk the line between custom and vintage. Based on a 1960 Strat, the Journeyman is a showpiece, with an Aged Aztek Gold nitrocellulose-lacquer finish that's been convincingly weather-checked to exude the appearance of having been carried from clubs to freezing cold vans for years. The effect is also available in the Aged hues of Candy, Tangerine, Sherwood Green Metallic, Lake Placid Blue and Candy Apple Red.

The customization begins with an alder body that is both non-contoured (i.e. flat-sided) and trimmed front-and-back in white binding. The gold/white theme looks very classy in a '50s sort of way, and the light aging of the plastic parts is apparent in the three-ply pickguard, knobs, pickup covers and switch tip. The attaching screws all wear a corroded patina as well, which looks so right here, as opposed to some "antiqued" guitars we've seen from other makers that lose the overall effect by using brand-new screws to secure aged components.

In fact, the closer you look at the Journeyman, the better it gets. The chrome on the vintage-style vibrato bridge looks decades old, with its softly dulled sheen, as do the jack plate and strap buttons. The bent-steel saddles, springs, and fulcrum and intonation screws are all rusted to replicate being grimed by sweat from countless hours of playing. At the opposite end, the '50s-style tuners and dual string trees are similarly age-advanced and look ever so cool against the dark sheen of the roasted, quarter-sawn maple neck. A chrome neck-joint plate bearing the Custom Shop stamp is actually the only item on this guitar that looks new.

The medium-profile '59 "C" neck is also finished in nitro lacquer and has a tactile, silky

feel that is inviting to the hand. It's interesting how one can totally get the sense of playing a vintage guitar while knowing full well that it's an entirely modern creation. On the top side, the rosewood fingerboard is adorned with clay position dots and carries 21 perfectly groomed medium-vintage frets with nicely rounded tips that roll smoothy into the edges of the fretboard. The small bone nut has also been carefully fitted and smoothed so that no sharp corners can be felt.

I couldn't resist removing the pickguard to have a look inside, and it's satisfying that Fender went the extra mile by using waxed, cloth-covered wire for all the connections, along with old-school paper-in-oil caps. The Stratocaster JCE single-coils are staggered-pole, low-wind units for balance, clarity and tonal authenticity. However, customization extends here too, as Fender uses what's called 1/2 Blender wiring, which turns the second tone control into a blend pot when the five-way selector is in positions one and two (i.e. bridge and middle, which some call positions four and five). At any rate, with the selector in the bridge position, the blend knob lets you add the neck pickup in any proportion, while the bridge/middle setting allows you to blend-in the neck pickup to change the tone of that combination. It's a cool system that lets you easily access lots of sounds on the fly, while the guitar still functions as normal for the neck, middle-plus-neck and middle positions.

BASED ON A 1960 STRAT, THE JOURNEYMAN HAS BEEN CAREFULLY MASSAGED TO WALK THE LINE BETWEEN CUSTOM AND VINTAGE

The combination of a roasted neck (which drives out tone-killing moisture) and top-quality body wood and solid hardware — not to mention that the bridge is adjusted to lay flat against the top — gives the Journeyman excellent resonance and sustain. I found myself playing it for long stretches without feeling the need to plug in, and my only issue was having to constantly re-tune the low strings when using the vibrato. No amount of string stretching seemed to help,

so perhaps adding another spring and re-adjusting the claw might be a solution. Weighing a touch over eight pounds, the guitar is a comfortable hold on a three-set night, and I have to say there's something Tele-like about the way a flat-sided Strat positions your right hand that's kind of neat, if you happen to be a Tele player.

Driving a Fender Deluxe Reverb or a Victoria Double Deluxe 2x12 combo, the Journeyman sounded excellent, delivering glassy and bell-like tones whether hammering on the neck pickup boosted with an overdrive pedal, getting funky rhythm sounds when playing super clean on the neck/middle and bridge/middle combinations, or summoning a soaring lead tone on the bridge setting when fired up with a Fulltone OCD driving into an EHX Mini Deluxe Memory Man. You can further texturize tones with the blend knob by rolling in some neck pickup and softening the bridge pickup's bite, or by using it to create a big three-pickup tone on the second position, thereby completely changing its character. It's great to have these options at your fingertips, and the Journeyman is all the more flexible because of its 1/2 Blender wiring.

All things considered, the limited-edition Custom Shop Limited-Edition Double-Bound Stratocaster Journeyman Relic merits a close look. It's well made and has a superb neck with excellent fretwork, and its tones embody everything that people dig about early '60s Strats. Each example comes with a deluxe G&G hardshell case with embroidered Custom Shop logo, a black-leather portfolio containing a certificate of authenticity and detailed build info, and an accessories package that includes a stitched-leather strap, a nickel-plated trem cover, extra springs and more. Our review sample looks awesome with its aged-gold finish, and I'd surmise that anyone who keeps an eye on new Custom Shop offerings will want to get their hands on one of these guitars.

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R.I.P.

HOWARD ALEXANDER DUMBLE

The famed amp maker passed away January 16, 2022, at age 77. Slide statesman **Sonny Landreth** recalls his friend.

I MET HIM in 1994 through a good mutual friend, the late great Stephen Bruton. Stephen had been raving about the Dumble amps he'd played out in Los Angeles, bought an Overdrive Special (ODS) and then brought it to Grant Street Dancehall in Lafayette, Louisiana, where we had a gig booked. He insisted that I try it out at soundcheck, so I did and was instantly hooked. Then, prompted by Stephen's word on my behalf, Alexander called me out of the blue while I was in the studio recording *South of I-10*. He was very courteous and most complimentary about one of my albums and invited me to come out to his place so that I could try out some of his amps.

I was in and out of Los Angeles a lot back then, so it worked out for me to visit him at his stronghold in Pasadena and, later, when he relocated to Sunland. We hit it off right away, and once he got me into his workshop, a 28-year adventure began. It was like being in a mad scientist's lab, unbelievably full of gear, gadgetry and boxes of stuff piled up everywhere (think the reality TV series *Hoarders* meets Science Channel's *Beyond Tomorrow*). I spent countless hours with him tweaking while I played, even after he built my amp and cab. It was big fun. He had a gentle spirit with a great sense of humor and had an incredible ear for capturing his instincts sonically. He was always coming up with something new and would be excited to tell me about the latest.

"Well, sir" — often said, in a lighthearted, endearing way — "I've developed a new technology and I'm calling it Ultraphonix." Or a new amp: "I've built a class A amp, and it is so chimey that I've named it..." — pause for dramatic effect — "Angel's Breath."

And then there were Alexander's tried-and-true options that he offered up, like adding the HRM mod. In his articulate, scholarly voice, he asked, "You know what that stands for?" Then, like a little kid, he blurted out, "Hot Rubber Monkey." He reveled in conjuring up names for everything, especially if there was a story involved.

HE TURNED AROUND. "I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU ASKED ME THAT!" I'D HIT A NERVE

Ironically, the only time he ever got upset with me was when he finally came up with a name for my amp. He'd learned that a woman at one of my shows said, "Oh, baby" after one of my songs, and, without fail, it would crack him up every time it came up in conversation. A year later, after our friend Robben Ford played on some of my tracks and Alexander was digging the sound of both of our amps recorded together, I made the mistake of asking him what he would think of making my amp sound a little more like Robben's? He was at his bench. He turned around and fired, "I can't believe you asked me that! Your amp isn't anything like Robben's! It isn't like any of the others!"

Yikes! I knew I'd hit a nerve.

"Well, sir?" he asked, not so endearingly, arms folded, clearly wanting a response.

I played my only ace: "Ohhhhhh, baby!"

He started laughing so hard that I was afraid he'd fall off his chair. From that moment on, ODS serial #0188 had a name that stuck.

I believe Alexander's greatest satisfaction came from creating technology that translated into art by the individual artists he specifically tailored his designs for. It was very personal for him. Yeah, he was eccentric and could be quirky and difficult, but he also had a big heart, was always in my corner and connected me with a lot of great people and projects. He was a dear friend whose colorful genius made life a hell of a lot more interesting.

Sonny Landreth with ODS serial #0188. Or as Alexander Dumble dubbed it, Oh Baby!

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THE ART OF SOUL

Browan Lollar of St. Paul and the Broken Bones calls on the wisdom of his heroes on the band's latest, *The Alien Coast*.

BY JIM BEAUGEZ | PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSH WEICHMAN

THE GUITAR PLAYERS who most influenced Browan Lollar serve as bookends of a sort. In style and tone, the guitarist for horn-heavy soul purveyors St. Paul and the Broken Bones hangs out somewhere between Steve Cropper and Radiohead, and never more so than on his band's latest album, *The Alien Coast* (ATO).

"I'm so impressed with somebody like [*Radiohead's*] Jonny Greenwood or Ed O'Brien, because those guys were guitar players in the biggest band on Earth," he explains. "Then they were like, 'We don't want to be a guitar band anymore; we want to be an electronic band.'"

Lollar says he and his bandmates can relate, although he's reluctant to make the comparison. "Our band is sort of at the same point, where we're like, 'We don't want to make that type of music or be known for one type of music,'" says the guitarist, who previously played in Jason Isbell's 400 Unit band in the early aughts. "We want to explore and really press ourselves. I find myself thinking about those guys a lot and what they would do in certain situations."

After forming in Birmingham, Alabama in 2012, the octet became darlings of the festival and club circuits for its throwback look and sound. It didn't take long for the band members to grow out of their matching suits, though. Once their experimental streak began to show, they tugged on that thread and kept pulling it forward. "A lot of times, especially these days, we'll bring in something that's totally written on a synthesizer," Lollar says. Once the other band members get ahold of an idea, though, that synth phrase could end up as a guitar riff or horn blast. And for Lollar, that's the fun of it.

"I'M INTERESTED IN GUITAR AS AN INSTRUMENT THAT ADDS TO A BAND INSTEAD OF OVERTAKES IT"

On the eve of releasing *The Alien Coast*, he talked with us about finding his place in an eight-piece band and coming of age in a music town with a backstory all its own.

You grew up near FAME Recording Studio. What was it like to develop around so many great musicians?

I lived over in Florence, which is just across the river from Fame. Everybody knew exactly what Fame had done back in the day. I grew up going to bars and seeing people like Kelvin Holly, who was Little Richard's guitar player for a long time, play to people who were just ignoring them. I thought you had to be that good to play at a bar. Years later, after I started touring, I realized how special what we have there is.

How did your early recording sessions impact you as a young player?

We recorded the *Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit* [*2009*] record at FAME. That was the first time I'd actually been able to set up camp in there with a band, where we had the studio for a week and got to move in. It was also my first real opportunity to get into the studio with all the toys and have time to experiment and do things that Jason didn't have planned out before going into the studio. I still think about that session a lot.

Which players were you most impressed by growing up?

I loved Chet Atkins and Mark Knopfler, and people from the old style of playing. Then I got into more band-oriented players like Steve Cropper and David Gilmour. I felt those players knew their role and the spot in the music they needed to fill, and they filled it perfectly. Steve Cropper isn't flashy, but he would come in with a really raw sound. It was just crazy to me how he was able to make that Telecaster sound work in that setting. For a long time I've been interested in guitar as an instrument that adds to a band instead of overtakes it, especially with St. Paul and the Broken Bones, because we've got so much stuff going on, and it's so important to be dynamic in the band.

How did you find your place in such a large ensemble?

I had to discover that I didn't have to go in there and be "guitar guy" and come up with riffs and stuff. When we first started, before [*2014's*] *Half the City*, I told the guys I didn't want to take a bunch of guitar solos. I didn't think that this band needed to be a guitar solo-y band. At that point in my life, I was pretty tired of it. I just wanted to focus on writing songs. Luckily, it doesn't really lend itself to that, anyway.

TAYLOR HILL/GETTY IMAGES

Lollar onstage with St. Paul and the Broken Bones at Brooklyn Steel, October 4, 2018

Do you lean on any music theory tips or lessons to find complementary notes to what the horns are playing?

Very little. I'm the one guy in the band that isn't great at music theory. I know it enough to have a grudging respect, because I have to. All our horn players can just spout the stuff off, and Al [*Gamble*], too, our organ player. I know what works and doesn't over a certain chord.

What do you find most challenging about playing in this band?

There's eight guys onstage, okay? All the low-frequency stuff is organ and bass. All the mid- to high-frequency stuff is pretty much covered by the horns, and all the high-frequency stuff with our singer. Where does that leave the guitar player? For a long time, I was experimenting to find what kind of guitar tone really suited us.

Where did that journey take you?

I went from a [*Gibson*] ES-335 to an old [*Gibson*] Trini Lopez that I really love. It didn't really work, though, so I went to a [*Fender*] Jazzmaster and finally settled on a [*Southside Custom Guitars*] T-style, because it's got that Steve Cropper thing where it kind of threads the needle between all those other very rounded, beautiful instruments.

You've been upheld as a plug-and-play guitar player. Considering how far out you get on *The Alien Coast*, has that reputation held?

Yeah. Actually, it's gotten a little better. When we fly, we've got 1,000 bags to get from point A to point B. Right now on my pedalboard, I've got one of those Cry Baby Mini Wahs, and I really like it a lot. I've got a Boss ES-5 multi-effects processor; that's what I use for flange and a little bit of echo. That goes into a Strata reverb pedal, and from there I go out. I don't have a lot of pedals because I have to focus on what I'm playing with my hands. If I start tap dancing too much, I can't play well.

Your playing in this band is well suited to a combo amp. What are you using?

For a long time, I was playing the Supro Thunderbolt Plus, but our horn player Allen [*Branstetter*] is playing a lot of secondary guitar parts on the new record, and he's going through the Thunderbolt now, and I've moved back over to a Fender Twin. I can't seem to get away from a Fender amp. Most of the time, if it's not a Fender amp, I'm just trying to make it sound like a Fender amp.

As a band, it sounds like you threw out the rule book this time.

We have been evolving in that way ever since the second record. With this album, we asked about every single part of this record, "Does this song need this?" We didn't just throw guitar on a track if it didn't need it, and honestly that went for anything. There's barely any horns. We really just wanted it to be a challenge for us. We wanted it to be out of our comfort zone.

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

The Alien Coast

"Minotaur," "The Last Dance," "Ghost in Smoke," "Alien Coast," "Love Letter From a Red Roof Inn"

HANDMADE TALES

The old world meets original design at Eastman Guitars, where every instrument has its own story.

BY DAVE HUNTER

LIFT THE LID on an Eastman Guitar like the T64/v and T184MX models reviewed this issue (see page 82), and questions about their origins will probably go right out the window the moment you take the instrument from the case. Just as companies like Yamaha, Ibanez, Aria and others helped to establish a new high-quality reputation for Japanese-made guitars in the 1970s and '80s, Eastman Musical Instruments has shown for several years that guitars made in their Beijing workshop can rival any large-shop producers for quality, tone and playability. Founded as Eastman Strings in 1992 by Chinese flutist-turned-entrepreneur and Boston University graduate Quian Ni, the company was launched on its fine hand-crafted violins, violas and cellos, and has been making a wide range of acclaimed acoustic and electric guitars since 2004.

We spoke with two prime movers in Eastman's Guitar division: international sales and product development manager Pepijn 't Hart and master luthier Otto D'Ambrosio, who are based, respectively, in the Netherlands and Pomona, California. They gave us the inside scoop on how this maker keeps hitting the mark.

Pepijn 't Hart

I think many guitarists are fascinated with the story of Eastman's birth because it helps to explain why this is not just another generic guitar factory. It started with the foundation of fine acoustic classical-instrument making and is still run like a shop that hand-makes all its own instruments.

Otto D'Ambrosio It's one of the most amazing aspects of Eastman. Quian has this insatiable appetite to look at something, especially extremely complicated wooden objects that create music, and say, "Oh, that's not that complicated. We can figure it out!" And he's done it with the most complicated of stringed instruments: the violin and cello. And when he wanted to move on, he didn't decide to go into electric guitars; he went into jazz archtop guitars, which were the most complicated to make.

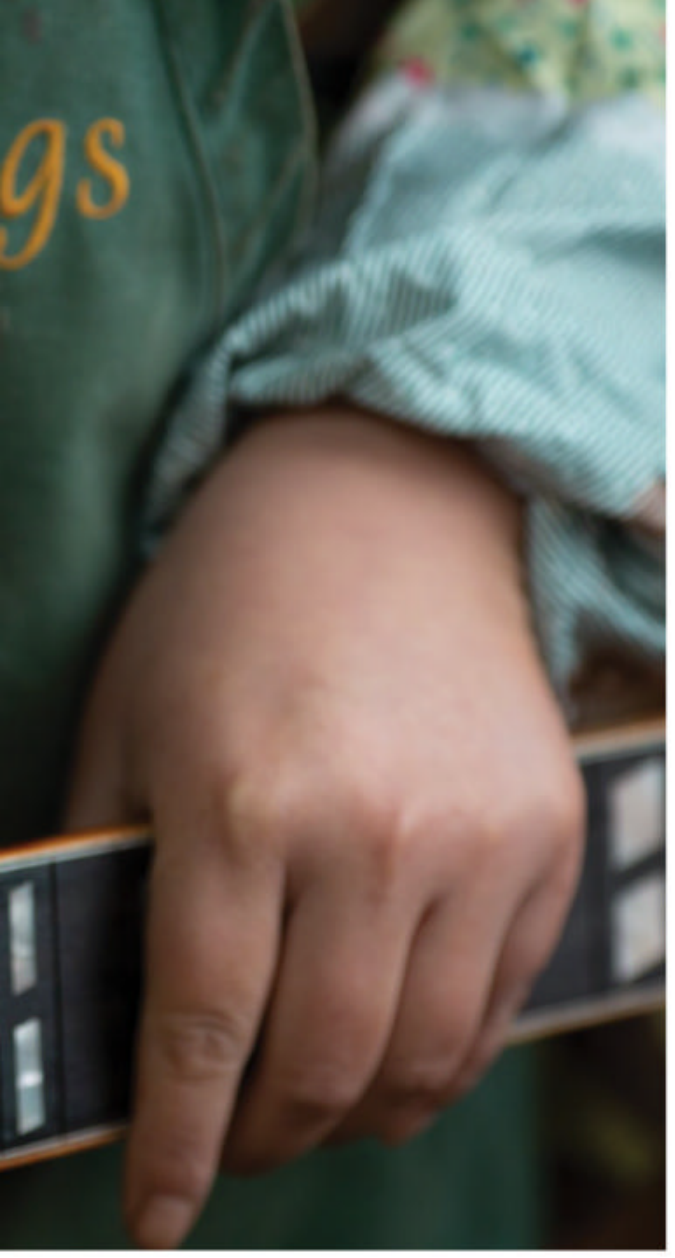
Yes, that's a very demanding craft. And in some ways Eastman's trajectory kind of follows Gibson's, from hand-carved archtops to a wide range of guitars.

Pepijn 't Hart There are a lot of similarities between Gibson and Eastman when it comes to mandolins and archtops, because we make much the same instruments. And one of the things that struck me when I started working with Eastman in 2008 was that it's all built on the Stradivari way. Stradivari built his violins with a team of specialists, and that's exactly what we do. We have a lot of workers, both male and female, and they all are more or less their own boss. It's not that they have to clock in, et cetera; they are paid for what they accomplish. And some are doing fret work, others are doing the necks, and so forth. Some people have been with us for more than 25 years. If you do something that much, you get so good at it.

What are some of the factors that distinguish the way Eastman makes guitars today?

D'Ambrosio Back in the early 2000s, I had just finished working with Guild Guitars, and the reason I worked with Guild was that they still did a lot of handwork. There were no CNCs in that factory, in Westerly, Rhode Island, and, as Pepijn said about Eastman, everyone had a dedicated position there. They were extremely good at it, and they were proud of it. And that was one of the things I saw when going over to these Eastman workshops. It was like an old-school American guitar factory.

But you fast-forward 20 years and the modern guitar factory doesn't look the same, at all. So that's one of the reasons why I love



Eastman so much. There are people working on these instruments, and they're passionate about them, and they create beautiful objects with their hands.

't Hart At the heart of this company is the Chinese mentality of always seeking to do great work. When Otto and I walk through the workshop and we give compliments and so forth, they always say, "Oh, thank you very much. I will do better tomorrow!" So there is this really, really strong urge to do the best they can, so they always improve. They never take any suggestion as an insult.

Eastman's reputation had already been growing in the guitar community when you came out with your varnish finishing process on many models a few years ago, and that feature seemed to take it to the next level for many players. How did that come about?

Otto D'Ambrosio

't Hart Otto and I visit the Chinese workshop two or three times a year — although not in the past two years. On one occasion, when we were walking through the workshop, there was an unfinished archtop guitar. I asked the varnish lady [*Li Hua Rong*], "Can you finish these like you do the violins?" Because the violins were finished in Antique Varnish, and they look like they're from the 1800s or something. Really good. She has been doing this for over 22 years and is an absolute master at it.

So she asked me to pretend to play the guitar, so she could see where it would age naturally. And that was the first instrument that we did like that: the T58, a big Gretschy archtop with a Bigsby and TV Jones pickups. Otto created some beautiful pickup rings for it. And suddenly we attracted a whole different audience.

Although the Eastman electric line has largely been based around modified and improved renditions of classic models, you've also released some totally originally designs, like the Romeo and Romeo LA.

't Hart Yeah, Otto came up with Romeo, and in 2020 it was our best-selling guitar, and it was a fully original thinline instrument. In my opinion, Otto is one of the big American designers. He really is. He can create something that is so unique.

D'Ambrosio But the Romeo would not exist if the workshop were not capable of pulling it off. After 15 years of experience with this shop, knowing that they're able to do these extremely well-pressed laminates and all this handwork and binding work and neck setting... It's the only way that Romeo is able to be a product on the market at all.

Is there anything else in the pipeline for original electric-guitar designs from Eastman?

't Hart Yes. Our first original solidbody electric design is coming in time for summer NAMM, as the partner to Romeo. Maybe you can guess the name! We're very excited about it and can't wait to get it out there.

Mike McCready onstage with Pearl jam for the MusiCares Concert for Recovery, in Seattle, May 10, 2018

MY CAREER IN FIVE SONGS

From Temple of the Dog to Pearl Jam, these are the cuts Mike McCready singles out from his long, successful run.

BY MARK McSTEA

MIKE McCREADY'S CLASSIC rock- and blues-influenced soloing has been part of Pearl Jam's signature sound since they formed under the name Mookie Blaylock in Seattle, in 1990. Signing to Epic Records the following year, they changed their name and released their debut album, *Ten*, a breakthough that generated three hit singles — "Alive," "Even Flow" and "Jeremy" — and established the band as a major force in the '90s music scene. Pearl Jam developed a sound contemporaneous with the burgeoning grunge movement, yet they were unafraid to reference elements of classic rock in their arrangements. Playing alongside rhythm and co-lead guitarist Stone Gossard, McCready brought elements of Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan and David Gilmour without ever resorting to slavishly ripping off their licks.

Pearl Jam have always maintained a high degree of quality control over their music, releasing only 11 studio albums to date over a 30-year career. The band's latest full-length, 2020's *Gigaton*, followed after a seven-year gap from the album before it, 2013's *Lightning Bolt*. According to McCready, that is not the intention for their next record. "Assuming all goes according to plan, we'll be touring the states and Europe in 2022, and then we should be looking at making an album after that," he tells *Guitar Player*. "So I don't expect there to be anywhere near as long an interval before the next record comes out."

Reflecting his love of Stevie Ray Vaughan, McCready bought what he thought was a 1959 Fender Strat in 1991. "It was the first expensive guitar that I ever owned," he explains. "It was kind of beat-up around the sides, but it's gotten a lot worse since I bought it; I do love guitars that look beat up. I put a five-way switch in because it had the original three-way and I use all the switch positions on the Strat, so I really get the full mileage out of the sonic options. Fender wanted to make a custom model, replicating every detail on the guitar, so they took it away for a couple of days to measure and photograph everything. When they brought it back to me, they told me that it's actually a '60 Strat. I was totally shocked. I felt like I'd been living a lie for years." He laughs. "I've got a '59 tattoo, so I need to get a 'plus one' added to it."

Notwithstanding the unexpected news regarding the guitar's vintage, McCready was blown away by what the Custom Shop came up with. "They did such a great job that I've actually confused the new model with the

MAT HAYWARD/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

original at times," he admits. "I did wonder for a moment if my original might feel a little different once they'd taken it apart and reassembled it, but it was in the hands of master builders, so the mojo was still there when I got it back. I guess I've done maybe a thousand shows with it, so it's a part of me. We're working on a more affordable signature model now, because obviously this limited-run custom shop model is a relatively expensive guitar."

McCready has performed with many acts over the years, including Temple of the Dog, featuring late Soundgarden vocalist Chris Cornell, and Mad Season, fronted by deceased Alice in Chains singer Layne Staley. More than 30 years down the line, he is more enthusiastic and excited by music than ever before. "Just as lockdown kicked in, we were all rehearsed and ready to go on tour," he says. "I learned to use GarageBand, and since I had a lot of time on my hands, I got pretty good at using it and worked on a lot of song ideas. It helped me keep my sanity. I'm always learning, working on improving my songwriting ability and staying in gratitude. I try to keep learning new things all the time. It's so great to have such a huge fanbase that still wants to see us. That still blows me away and keeps everything exciting year after year."

REACH DOWN
TEMPLE OF THE DOG, *TEMPLE OF THE DOG* (1991)

"*Temple of the Dog* was the first legitimate album that I played on. Chris Cornell wrote a demo for this song that was just spectacular. He played everything on it. I remember him saying, 'Hey, let's make the first song on the record an 11-minute song, just to piss off the record company!' [*laughs*] He'd said, 'We'll need a long lead part on the song to stretch it out.' I was very nervous; I wanted to make sure

With Keith Richards, 1992. Pearl Jam were opening for Richards' band, the X-pensive Winos

PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES (WITH RICHARDS); KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES (TEMPLE OF THE DOG)

Onstage with Jeff Ament and Chris Cornell in Temple of the Dog, November 14, 2016

I wasn't overplaying and that I was respecting the song. I did one lead and Chris said, 'I think you can do better,' and then he went out for a cigarette.

"I just really went for it on the next take. I pulled out all the tricks I'd learned up to that point from listening to Stevie Ray Vaughan and Jimi Hendrix, toggle-switch stuff — everything. I didn't think about it though; I was just playing. For the last minute and a half of the solo, my headphones had fallen off, but I was so into it that I played on through. That's the take on the record. Somehow, I really channeled something special. I think people weren't really playing long solos so much at that time, and I'm still so grateful to Chris and the guys for giving me the opportunity there to really put my own mark on such a great song."

PRESENT TENSE
PEARL JAM, *NO CODE* (1996)

"I wrote this song at a time when I was trying to experiment and do different things. I just came in with that riff and started singing some lyrics, and the guys helped me arrange it. I like to have a lot of dynamics in my songs, and I felt that this was something that we could really build when we played it live. The intro was just me and Ed [*Eddie Vedder*], and hearing the crowd sing the lyrics back when we do that part live is immensely moving and satisfying.

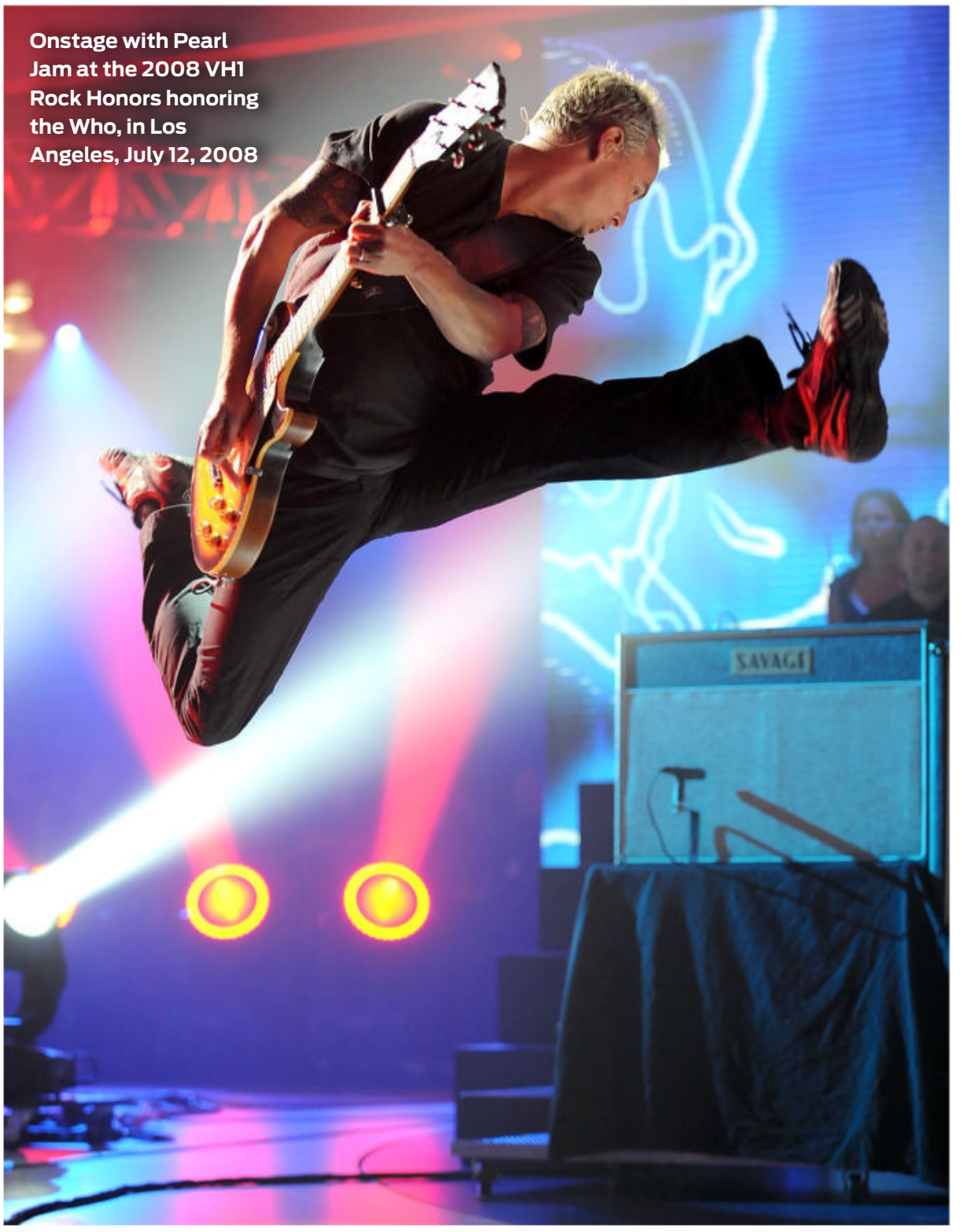
"The song is about keeping things in the present tense, not tripping out about the future too much or worrying about the past. I love that idea. If I can stay in the present tense, my life is much better. This song is in D tuning, with the G tuned to F♯. There's a lot of space in the song. I think I'm using an MXR Phase 90 on the intro, and the track builds from there. Everybody in the band is aware of space and thinking about what not to put in the song. That's a David Gilmour thing I picked up on. He uses space to let his solos breathe."

"FENDER TOLD ME MY '59 STRAT IS ACTUALLY A '60. I WAS TOTALLY SHOCKED"

GIVEN TO FLY
PEARL JAM, *YIELD* (1998)

"I recorded the Mad Season album, *Above*, with Layne Staley around the time that I wrote this song, in '94. This track was a huge deal for me, because it was the first time I'd ever gotten sober, and making that Mad Season record gave me the confidence that I could really do this and write songs in a new frame of mind for Pearl Jam records as well. On the day I wrote it, it was snowing in Seattle. I was messing around with different tunings, and I had this euphoric feeling, like, 'Wow, I can write those kind of songs now.' I felt like I had a new confidence. Prior to then, the fact that there were so many great writers in Pearl Jam made me feel less confident in putting my songs forward. But with 'Given to Fly,' I felt that I could really relate to the lyrics that Eddie came up with. It was a turning point for me, and it's one my favorite songs of all the ones I've ever written.

"I tuned my '60 Strat to open D, without detuning the G string to F♯. When you change



Onstage with Pearl Jam at the 2008 VH1 Rock Honors honoring the Who, in Los Angeles, July 12, 2008

tunings, it forces you to play a different way. Recently, I've been doing a lot of things in standard tunings but using capos to change the feel of what I'm playing. I like to be pushed, though, and a different tuning will really do that. I like to make a mistake and learn from it, and different tunings help with that. They break you out of all the habits that you gravitate toward subconsciously in standard tuning. I think I recorded this with a Fender Bassman into a Marshall JCM800 and a 4x12 with four 25-watt speakers and my MXR Phase 90. Some people have said it sounds a little like 'Going to California.' It never even occurred to me at the time. I'll certainly cop to ripping off some Zep in my songs at times, but that wasn't the case on this one. [*laughs*] Robert Plant came to one of our shows in Sweden, and he jokingly gave me some shit about it. It was glorious. Eddie even introduced the song as 'Given to California' on that date." [*laughs*]

INSIDE JOB
PEARL JAM, *PEARL JAM* (2006)

"This was one of the first times that I'd written lyrics as well as all the music to a song. We were trying to get it ready for the record and we were running out of time. It was getting down to the wire and Eddie didn't have any lyrics. We were on tour in Mexico, and I remember thinking that if I don't come up with some lyrics for this song now, it's not gonna make the cut. I just sat down and wrote what I was feeling, in terms of how it's an inside job for me to take care of myself, my demons or whatever, and find a spiritual solution, so that was the angle I was looking at. I remember when I'd completed the song and took it to play for Eddie, I was super nervous: 'Okay, I'm going to sing for Ed'. [*laughs*] He was very gracious about it and he liked the lyrics.

"When we got back from that tour and Ed put his vocals on it, it sounded amazing. I really wanted to write an epic piece of music, and I think the band helped me to pull that off. I played the acoustic intro underneath the strange, dissonant notes that Stone put over the top, which made it sound darker and cooler. Live, I go totally Jimmy Page and use my double-neck SG [*Gibson EDS-1275*] for this. I don't generally write solos out, but I did for this one. I wanted to put something down that would be a solo that I'd always want to reproduce when we played the song live."

"PEOPLE HAVE SAID 'GIVEN TO FLY' SOUNDS A LITTLE LIKE 'GOING TO CALIFORNIA.' ROBERT PLANT JOKINGLY GAVE ME SOME SH*T ABOUT IT"

SIRENS
PEARL JAM, *LIGHTNING BOLT* (2013)

"I'm so happy with the way the music for this track turned out, and Ed's lyrics are really beautiful. We recorded this in L.A., and I worked out a delayed lead on it. I wanted to sound like a siren passing by you. It was another lead part that I consciously wrote to be a permanent fixture in the song. I was trying to channel some David Gilmour. I'd seen *The Wall* tour around this time, which was the most incredible show I'd ever seen. I love Gilmour; he is the master of delay, subtlety, underplaying and knowing when to hit exactly the right note. His solos are songs within a song. I don't know if he works them out or not. We cover 'Comfortably Numb', and I have to do that solo exactly note for note. You can't improvise on it; it just doesn't sound right.

"Stone and I are always discussing how perfect Gilmour's solos are. I'd say about 10 percent of my solos are worked out, and the rest are off the cuff. Initially it came out of laziness and not wanting to re-learn my solos. After a while I found that my first two or three leads are the best ones. Sometimes I'll do a comp. The problem with repeated takes is that I think about it too much and start trying to fit in parts that I liked, but the spontaneity will have gone and it never has the same spark if I do multiple takes. After three takes I'm usually not feeling it."

JEFF KRAVITZ/FILMMAGIC/GETTY IMAGES

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Chet on the Cheap

The "sports car" of the Gretsch line, this 1959 Model 6118 Double Anniversary is a budget ride to Atkins country.

GIVEN ITS VINTAGE origins and feature set, this 1959 Gretsch Double Anniversary could easily slip under the wire as a classic in its own right. As often as not, however, you'll see it lauded for its stand-in status, hailed as a poor man's 6120 Chet Atkins, since it left the factory with some 95 percent of the same specs as that hallowed collectible. As it stands though, the Double Anniversary represents much of the best of Gretsch's golden years, and at a fraction of the cost of another guitar that might come to mind whenever the description "PAF-equipped '59 single-cut" is mentioned.

German immigrant Friedrich Gretsch founded the storied musical instrument company in Brooklyn, New York, in 1883, initially to make drums, banjos and tambourines. Guitars were added to the lineup a couple of decades later under the direction of his son, the next in a long line of "Fred" Gretsches to head the company. Six-strings became a more and more prominent part of the catalog through the jazz age, war years and into the birth of rock and roll. Gretsch introduced the Anniversary in 1958 to celebrate the company's 75th year in business, offering two models in two finish options each: the Anniversary, with one

pickup, and the Double Anniversary, with two, available in either Sunburst or two-tone Smoke Green.

Although it was presented as a celebration model, Gretsch intended the Anniversary to be accessible to a wide number of players. It received the same body shape and construction as the flagship 6120 Chet Atkins model, but it lacked that guitar's fingerboard and f-hole binding. The Anniversary was also available in hardtail only, with a "G" trapeze tailpiece and no standard Bigsby option. As such, it was considered a fully professional model. But with a price of $225 for the Single and $310 for the Double — versus $475 for a 1958 Gretsch 6120 — the Anniversary could get a lot of hard-working guitarists in the door. As the 1959 catalog put it, "This popular new beauty is the 'sports car' of the Gretsch line. Snappy, trim modern lines... exclusive built-in playing features that help give you the sound of distinction. A real knock-out in two-tone Smoke Green." Plenty of players agreed, and Gretsch sold a lot of these models.

As mentioned, the Anniversary's real USP was that it delivered the same basic specs and construction quality as more upscale models, at about 65 percent of the price (when considering the Double), lacking just a few strips of cellulose binding, which on many vintage Gretsch guitars has decayed or deteriorated over the years anyway. Otherwise, the addition of the second pickup included the full current-spec control array, with a three-way pickup selector, independent volume controls for each pickup, a master volume and a three-way tone switch (positioned alongside the pickup selector on the upper bout). Generally dubbed the mud switch for its ability to deliver two alternative sounds best described as dull and duller, the tone switch is considered next to useless by most players today. Some modify it with less impactful tone caps, while others just ignore it completely and leave it in the middle bypass position.

For today's players, the 1958–'59 Anniversaries are especially noteworthy for having the Filter'Tron humbucker, Gretsch's top-flight pickup from that time. Developed at the behest of Chet Atkins by engineer Ray Butts (inventor of the EchoSonic amplifier with built-in tape echo), the Filter'Tron was neck and neck with Gibson's own PAF for the title of first viable humbucking guitar pickup,

A CHANGE TO LIGHTER AND THINNER TRESTLE BRACING MADE THE 1959 VERSIONS MORE DESIRABLE, AND MORE RESONANT

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

- Archtop hollowbody made from laminated maple
- Single Venetian cutaway
- Light trestle bracing
- Two-tone smoke-green finish
- 24.6" scale length
- Two "Pat. Applied For" Filter'Tron humbucking pickups

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVE HUNTER

“A real knock-out in two-tone Smoke Green,” Gretsch’s 1959 catalog said of the Double Anniversary. It’s hard to disagree.

BY DAVE HUNTER

and while it sounds very different from the fatter unit from Kalamazoo, it ushered in another classic rock and roll tone.

Although they remain more affordable on the vintage market than Gretsch’s upscale models, Double Anniversaries like the one shown here are becoming harder to find and getting more expensive, thanks to their plethora of desirable features. The 1958–’59 Single Anniversaries, on the other hand, often cost half (or even less) than the Doubles. For that reason, they’re frequently snatched up and converted to Double status with a second pickup, either with extra volume controls or wired up hot-rod style, with the tone switch converted to a pickup selector fed into the single master-volume control.

While the ’58s are still great vintage sleepers, a construction change in late ’58 or early ’59 helped make the sophomore versions even more desirable. These guitars received the next evolution of Gretsch’s trestle bracing — the parallel trestle-like post-and-bridge system that braces the back and top — which was somewhat lighter and thinner, and allowed for a more resonant guitar overall.

Gretsch continued to offer the popular Anniversary models well after the 75th celebrations had passed, and even into the 100th anniversary and beyond, and delivered several renditions in the reissue years. Part way into 1960, however, the Anniversaries lost their Filter’Trons when the company introduced its own in-house HiLo’Tron single-coil pickup to replace the DeArmond Model 200 single-coils it had used previously. The HiLo’Trons are still very cool pickups, and plenty of players really dig them, but it’s hard to argue that they’re as desirable as a pair of original Filter’Trons.

Gretsch also changed the Anniversaries’ body construction somewhat through the ’60s as the company’s other models evolved, although it did not receive a zero fret until 1968, seven years after Gretsch’s upscale models received them, in 1961. Gretsch even gave this “sports car” model a bound fingerboard in 1963. Despite the changes, and arguably lesser desirability compared to the ’59 models, many of the ’60s Double and Single Anniversaries still provide surprisingly affordable access to genuine vintage Gretschitude. Experienced buyers of vintage models should look for issues such as binding deterioration and the possible need of a neck reset, but there’s often a lot of potential to be found for those who don’t mind taking on a project.

Fortunately, our example this month comes to us with few issues, just a little discoloration on some of the binding, and a fulsome double dose of “That Great Gretsch Sound” courtesy of two “Pat. Applied For” Filter’Tron pickups. And for all that, it’s almost as much fun to look at, lounging in its sultry two-tone Smoke Green finish, as it is to play. Well... almost.

BY JIM CAMPILONGO

Brothers in Charms

Sergio and Eduardo Abreu delight on this recording from their all-too-brief career.

ONE OF THE great things about getting my guitar repaired by Flip Scipio is that he'll brew up a nice cup of coffee and play an LP of some wonderful music I've never heard. He's like a "Vinyl Treasures" column in real time. One of the many LPs Flip played for me is *The Guitars of Sergio and Eduardo Abreu*, specifically the one released in 1969 on the U.K. label Ace of Diamonds, not to be confused with the album issued in 1971 on Columbia Masterworks. Both have the same name and similar covers, but to my ears the Ace of Diamonds disc is the standout recording from these talented brothers.

Born in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1950s, the Abreu brothers were taught music by their grandfather and went on to have significant, yet relatively short music careers between 1968 and 1975, before Eduardo made the decision to stop performing in public. Sergio became a respected maker of fine classical guitars and continues in the profession to this day.

Thankfully, their artistry is preserved on this great Ace of Diamonds album. Their technique and chemistry is sublime, and the recordings have an energy and fire that, even in the context of great guitar duos, make this album a standout. While I love the solo performances that intersperse their duo recordings on *The Guitars of Sergio and Eduardo Abreu*, the brothers together is timeless, as they seemingly morph into a single entity with 20 digits and 12 strings.

This is immediately heard on the elegant "Sir John Langton's Pavan," which opens the album. The brothers continue with Girolamo Frescobaldi's "Fugue," which features Sergio's arranging skills. The Vivaldi piece Preludio and Corrente, which comes next, gives the impression the brothers have broken a sweat, offering a dazzling display of virtuosity that sounds like six guitars instead of two. This is followed by the duo in full force with an absolute showstopper: Scarlatti's Sonata in D. Side one ends with Bach's Suite No. 3, S.995, which features a solo performance by Sergio that is intimate, with a personal touch. He pulls everything out of a nylon-string guitar with his right-hand picking placement, varying his attack with a vibrant imagination. Sergio takes us through all the movements, and it's like a roller-coaster ride in a beautiful garden. As spectacularly as the brothers perform, they never undermine the beauty of the composition, possibly because they sound fully in control.

Side two begins with Eduardo playing solo on Brazilian composer Villa-Lobos compositions Preludio No 1 and Estudio No. 1. Eduardo brings out the drama and passion of these pieces while exhibiting his flawless technique. Eduardo also tackles two Segovia compositions, "Estudio Sin Luz" and "Divertimento." I was pleased by this, since I've always felt Segovia was an underrated composer. Eduardo's last solo piece, Spanish composer Federico Moreno Torroba's "Madroños," is a must-hear. His technical authority and the prioritized loveliness of his performance have me in awe, and I'm happily reduced to a humble fan appreciating the guitar and its limitless possibilities.

THE BROTHERS SEEMINGLY MORPH INTO A SINGLE ENTITY WITH 20 DIGITS AND 12 STRINGS

The record closes with my favorite moments of this great LP, as Sergio and Eduardo join forces for Ravel's "Pavane Pour une Infante Défunte" and the Spanish composer Isaac Albéniz's "El Puerto," from *Iberia*. I can think of quite a few stellar duets I've heard in my time — John Williams and Julian Bream, Ida Presti and Alexandre Lagoya, to name two — but these performances by the Abreu brothers are most definitely gold medal contenders, in my humble opinion. Although the brothers playing together is what makes this record timeless and powerful, the mixture of solo and duo performances delivers a full listening experience through which we meet them collectively and individually. It's a great hang.

Some mornings when I'm combing through Twitter, Facebook and *The New York Times*, I feel like there's nothing but disagreement — immovable opinions that border on social anarchy. My mind can go in 20 different directions, but then there's the remedy, the heaven-sent medicine of what's best about us — and more often than not, that's the healing power of great art. The music on *The Guitars of Sergio and Eduardo Abreu* energizes and inspires me, and their otherworldly musicality makes me feel proud to be a human. Thanks again, Flip!

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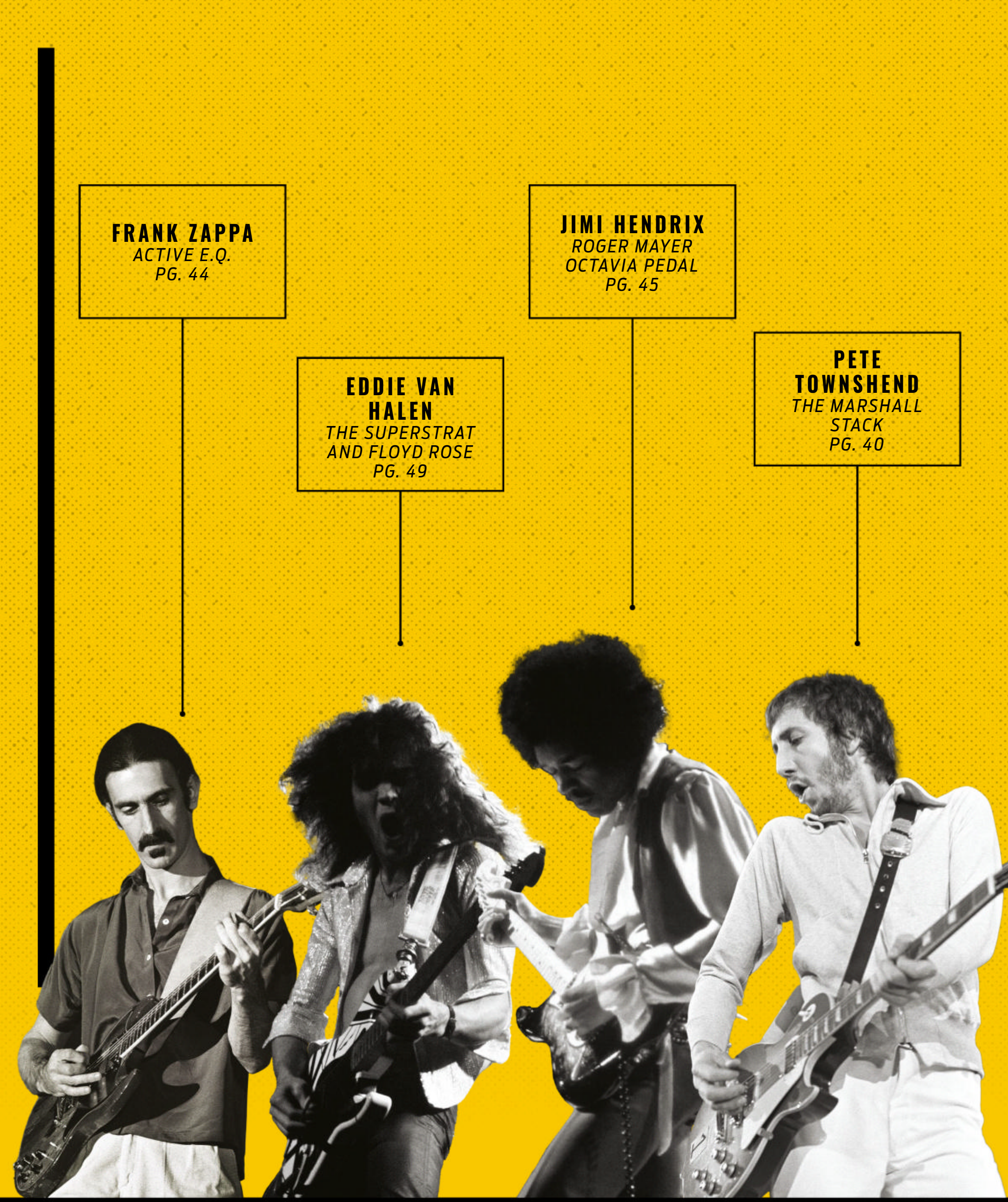
EDDIE VAN HALEN
THE SUPERSTRAT AND FLOYD ROSE
PG. 49

PETE TOWNSHEND
THE MARSHALL STACK
PG. 40



GUITAR INNOVATORS 25 GUITAR INNOVATORS

CHANGING GEAR

FROM CHARLIE CHRISTIAN TO TOM MORELLO, THESE 25 GUITARISTS SHIFTED THE COURSE OF GUITARS, AMPS, EFFECTS AND TONE, TO BRING US WHERE WE ARE TODAY.

BY DAVE HUNTER, CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI AND ART THOMPSON

INNOVATIONS ONLY MATTER if someone puts them to use, and in the world of the electric guitar, there has always been a player or two eager to put the latest piece of gear to work, all in the hope of taking performance and tone to the next level. Ever since Charlie Christian moved the electric guitar from the back of the orchestra to the forefront with his blade pickup–equipped Gibson ES-150, players have been exploring new ways to make the guitar speak what is inside of them, whether through pickups, hardware, amps, effects or newfangled accessories that can spark the imagination.

While the bulk of these innovations have been the handiwork of enterprising inventors like Ray Butts, Seth Lover, Jim Marshall and Roger Mayer, many of them were pushed along their path by guitarists unsatisfied with the sound of their instrument, amplifier or effects. A few remarkable individuals — like Les Paul and Tom Scholz — wore both the hat of performer and inventor.

All of which is to say the electric guitar would be nowhere today if it weren't for the players who we celebrate in this issue.

TOM HILL/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES (TOWNSHEND); RON HOWARD/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (HENDRIX); ROB VERHORST/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (ZAPPA); FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (VAN HALEN)

CHARLIE CHRISTIAN

HE BROUGHT THE ELECTRIC GUITAR TO THE FOREFRONT OF MUSIC

One of the most sensational jazz guitarists of his era, Charlie Christian greatly influenced the evolution of the electric guitar, and particularly the sound of jazz guitar. In 1937, he was playing piano in Oklahoma City when he met Count Basie's guitarist, Eddie Durham, himself credited as being one of the first to record with an amplified guitar. Durham convinced Christian to get a Gibson ES-150 electric hollowbody, which was 16 inches wide and had a 24 ¾–inch scale mahogany neck, solid mahogany back and sides with a solid spruce top, and a single blade pickup (later dubbed the Charlie Christian pickup). Priced at $150, the guitar came with a matching amplifier, the EH-150, which had a single 10-inch speaker and developed 15-watts via (in the Style 2 version of '36/'37) two 6F6 power tubes, a 5Z4 rectifier, one 6C5 triode and a 6N7 preamp tube.

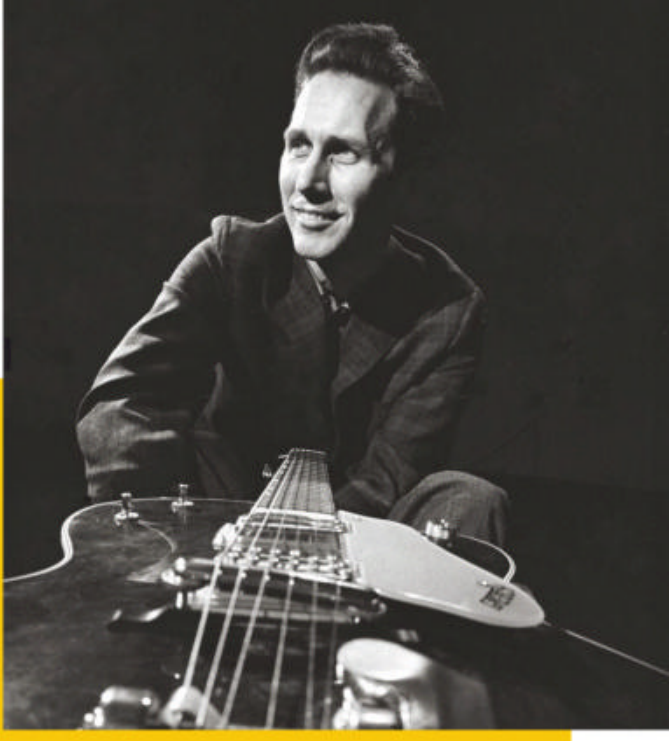
Armed with this rig, Christian rapidly developed his unique saxophone-style playing approach. Those who witnessed him performing around this time included jazz guitarist Mary Osborne, who was particularly impressed by his sound, which she likened to a "distorted saxophone." In 1939, following a tip from jazz/blues producer John Hammond, Christian was invited to audition for swing clarinetist Benny Goodman, who was interested in adding electric guitar to his band. Goodman hired Christian and the guitarist quickly made jazz history with his deft single-line soloing on songs like "Airmail Special," "Honeysuckle Rose" and, especially, "Solo Flight."

Christian's association with Goodman made him one of the biggest names of the swing era. Through he also played a Gibson ES-250 guitar and EH-185 amp, he always favored the ES-150, which led directly to Gibson's ES-175 from 1949 (a dual-pickup version debuted in 1953) and still remains highly popular in jazz-guitar circles some 73 years on. Sadly, Christian died of tuberculosis at just 25. — *Art Thompson*

HEAR IT: "Solo Flight" — The Benny Goodman Orchestra

CHET ATKINS

APOSTLE OF THE HUMBUCKING PICKUP



A VIRTUOSO PERFORMER and one of the first genuine stars of the electric guitar, Chet Atkins also embraced innovation, and drove it by encouraging new inventions that could help him move ever closer to his sonic ideals for the instrument.

Atkins had long been aware of the importance of the right pickup, and he matched various units to his Silvertone, Gibson and D'Angelico guitars before Gretsch courted him in 1954 to endorse the 6120 Hollowbody and 6121 Solidbody models. The trouble was, Atkins didn't much like the single-coil DeArmonds on his namesake guitars. "I hated the sound of the pickups," he told author Tony Bacon in 1995 for *The Gretsch Book*, "because the magnets were so strong on the string, you pluck a string and there was no sustain there, 'specially on bass strings. I was tortured pretty good until Ray Butts built that Filter'Tron pickup."

An electronics whiz and music store owner from Cairo, Illinois, Butts designed the EchoSonic amplifier with built-in tape echo, which Atkins had previously embraced, in 1954. When the guitarist griped about his DeArmonds, Butts knew just what to do: He designed a hum-canceling, dual-coil pickup, which he dubbed the Filter'Tron because it filtered out electronic hum. Atkins whole-heartedly embraced it and urged Gretsch to adopt the pickup for its entire upmarket line.

Butts' development of the Filter'Tron ran neck and neck with Gibson's PAF humbucker, and while the latter beat Gretsch to the market by a nose, Chet was performing with the Filter'Trons one year earlier. The Filter'Tron's narrower dimensions and more sparsely wound coils contributed to a brighter, clearer sound than the broader humbuckers. It established the classic rockabilly tone of the late '50s, revived in the late '70s by Stray Cat Brian Setzer, that has remained the benchmark to this day, and it proved powerful enough for heavy rockers like AC/DC's Malcolm Young and the Cult's Billy Duffy, too. — *Dave Hunter*

HEAR IT: "I Know That You Know," *Mister Guitar*

JP JAZZ ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (CHRISTIAN); MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (ATKINS); JESSE WILD (GRETSCH COUNTRY GENT)

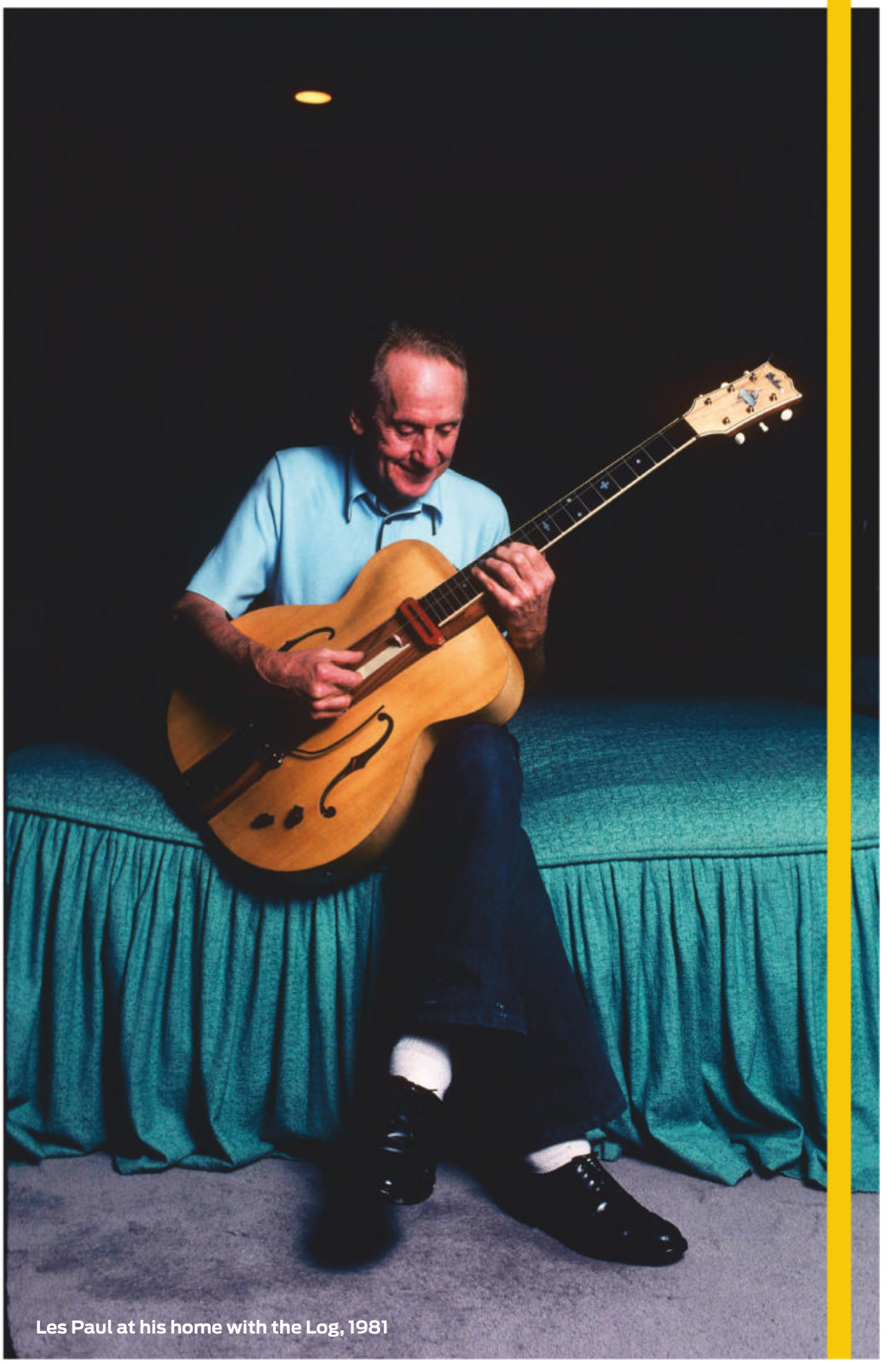
LES PAUL

FATHER OF THE SOLIDBODY ELECTRIC

Les Paul was working as a professional guitarist in the 1930s when he turned his highly inventive mind to building a solidbody electric guitar in order to overcome feedback and other issues that plagued amplified hollowbody instruments. In 1939, his solution took shape in the form of what he dubbed the "Log," basically a four-by-four piece of pine upon which he bolted a Gibson neck, a pair of pickups that he built, and his own bridge and vibrato tailpiece. To make the thing look like a guitar, he sawed an Epiphone archtop body in half and glued the "wings" to the pine block.

Les proved the viability of his concept by using the Log on recordings that he and his trio made with the Andrews Sisters, Bing Crosby and others, but the hallowed guitar company, Gibson, was unimpressed when Les brought it to Kalamazoo to show to the company chiefs in 1941. "I took the Log to Gibson and I spent 10 years trying to convince them that this was the way to go," he famously said. "But it wasn't easy. If it wasn't for Leo Fender I don't think that ever would have come off. Leo saw more in it than Gibson did." Besides, Gibson already had the ES-150 electric-archtop (and a matching amp), introduced in 1936 and popularized by Charlie Christian and other jazzers. Who needed a solidbody? But when the Fender Telecaster detonated on the Southern California scene in the early '50s, Gibson realized they needed to get in the solidbody game, pronto.

Enter Ted McCarty, who joined Gibson in 1948 and became its president just two years later. Armed with a sharp eye for style, he wanted to make an alternative to the slab-sided Telecaster by designing his single-cutaway guitar with an arched, carved-maple top. In 1950, he showed the guitar to Les, who approved the design and felt that it was sufficiently close to what he was going after to let Gibson put his name on it. The Les Paul model would have a rockier start than Fender's "plank" — and, for a time, even went out of production entirely — but that all changed once players like Mike Bloomfield, Eric Clapton, Peter Green and Mick Taylor started slinging Les Pauls. What Les started with the Log became a success story for Gibson.



Les Paul at his home with the Log, 1981

NEIL ZLOZOWER/ATLASICONS.COM

While it's true Rickenbacker's solidbody Model A-22 Electro "Frying Pan" predated Les's Log, it was a lap steel, not a Spanish-style guitar. Les owns the solidbody concept for his vision and tenacity. There's irony aplenty that Gibson's big hit after the Les Paul model was the thinline ES-335, a highly popular reimagining of what Les started with his crude Log. — *Art Thompson*

HEAR IT: Various recordings with the Andrews Sisters and Bing Crosby

GUITAR INNOVATORS 25 GUITAR INNOVATORS

ALVINO REY

THE MAN WHO MADE GUITARS TALK

It started as a novelty effect for a WWII-era talking puppet and became the ear-grabbing sound behind some of the 1970s' biggest rock hits. But while it achieved its greatest popularity in the early part of that decade thanks to Bob Heil, the talk box existed in a variety of forms long before he brought his device to market.

It was Alvino Rey who first popularized, if not invented, the effect in the late 1930s, using a throat contact mic to make his steel guitar speak. Rey had the mic wired in reverse to act as a speaker and fed his amplified signal into it. As he performed, his wife, Luise, stood offstage, wearing the device and mouthing the words to the song as Rey's steel guitar tones emerged from her lips. The same concept was behind the Sonovox, developed by Gilbert Wright in 1939 and demonstrated by a young Lucille Ball in a newsreel. Rey's bit of ventriloquism was put to use as the voice of Stringy the Talking Steel Guitar, a freakish-looking puppet that sang "St. Louis Blues" in the 1944 film *Jam Session*.

The talk box as we know it today was created by Nashville steel guitarist Bill West by sealing an eight-inch speaker in a box, from which extended a length of tubing for the player's mouth. Steel guitarist Pete Drake put West's device to use on his 1964 cut "Forever," and the novelty quickly caught on. Drake began selling the device himself, marketing it as the Talking Music Actuator.

Wright's Sonovox in action.

West's talk box eventually found its way into the rig of Joe Walsh, who would go on to use it on his 1973 hit, "Rocky Mountain Way," the first record on which most people in the classic-rock era heard the effect. By then, Kustom Electronics had gotten into the act with the Bag, a shoulder-slung device introduced in 1969 and used by Joe Perry on Aerosmith's "Sweet Emotion" in 1975 and by Jeff Beck that same year on "She's a Woman" from *Blow by Blow*.

But all those devices were relatively low wattage. It took Heil's high-powered Talk Box to make the effect viable for use on stadium and arena stages. He and Walsh made their prototype together on a Sunday afternoon. "We grabbed a 250-watt JBL, built a low-pass filter, got all the plumbing together, and voilà — the Talk Box," Heil recalled.

Enter Peter Frampton, who had first heard the effect when Drake played on sessions for George Harrison's *All Things Must Pass* album, on which Frampton also performed. Frampton — who knew Heil from his days as soundman for Humble Pie — used his Talk Box on 1975's "Show Me the Way" but made his biggest impression with it on "Do You Feel Like We Do," from his 1976 smash live album, *Frampton Comes Alive!* "People went nuts when I went to use the talk box," he told *Guitar Player*. "Hey, everybody needs a gimmick, and this was mine." Since then it's become a useful tool in the mouths of guitarists ranging from Richie Sambora to Jerry Cantrell. — *Christopher Scapelliti*

HEAR IT: "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo," *Pretzel Logic* — Steely Dan (Walter Becker)

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (REY); CBS/GETTY IMAGES (SONOVOX)

LONNIE MACK

HIS MAGNATONE VIBRATO INSPIRED JEFF BECK, SRV AND MANY OTHERS

A true shredder of his day, blues-rock trailblazer Lonnie Mack attained guitar-hero status when his high-octane instrumental version of Chuck Berry's "Memphis Tennessee" unexpectedly climbed the charts in 1963. He followed with the equally incendiary "Wham!," which was featured on his debut album, *The Wham of That Memphis Man*, an instrumental tour-de-force that influenced legions of guitar players during the brief period before the British Invasion swept onto the scene and pushed guitar to unprecedented heights.

Mack played a Gibson Flying V (serial number 007) that he purchased when he was 17, and he used it almost exclusively for his entire career. Early on, he had the V equipped with a modified Bigsby vibrato, which was reworked by his friend and music-store owner Glenn Hughes, who had to do some creative bending to mount a steel crossbeam some six inches below the apex of the "V." But Mack's signature tone mostly came from plugging into a Magnatone 260 amplifier, which featured a pitch-shifting vibrato that produced a "bendier" effect than the volume-modulating tremolo (never mind being labeled "vibrato") in Fender amps. As a result, Mack's explosive tone shimmered with a juicy warble, giving him an instantly recognizable sound that captured the ears of Jeff Beck, SRV, Dickey Betts and many others.

— *Art Thompson*

HEAR IT: "Susie-Q," *The Wham of That Memphis Man*

David Gilmour's Magnatone 260, same as Mack's

SCOTTY MOORE

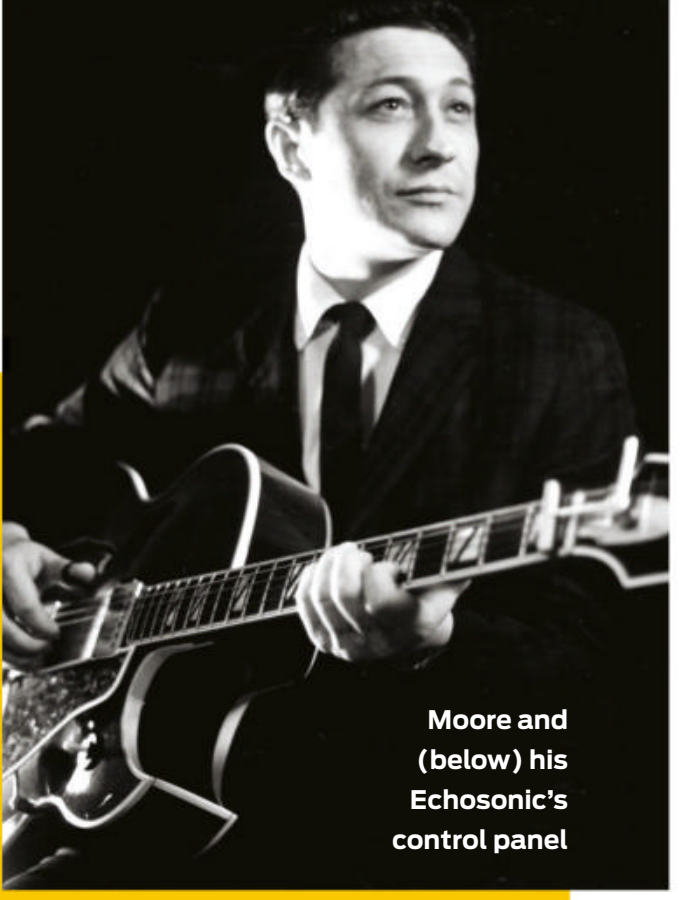
WITH AN ECHOSONIC AMP, HE PUT THE SLAPBACK IN THE 'BILLY

SCOTTY MOORE WASN'T the first guitarist to record with the innovative tape echo–equipped EchoSonic amplifier, but after hearing a Chet Atkins instrumental song on the radio, Moore realized that the slap echo he was hearing was quite different from the echo sound he got at Sam Phillips' Sun Studios. Moore says he did some investigating and found out that Atkins was using a new amp built by an accordion player and electronics wizard named Ray Butts, inventor of the Filter'Tron pickup for Gretsch [*see page 36*]. Moore subsequently bought an EchoSonic combo (the third one made) and used it famously on "Mystery Train," one of the seminal cuts he recorded with Elvis Presley in 1955.

Moore would continue to use the EchoSonic throughout his time with Elvis (which lasted until 1968), although he soon found that the 25-watt amp wasn't enough to handle the scream-fests of Elvis's gigs. He solved the problem by having Butts build two additional 50-watt booster cabinets, each with four eight-inch Lansing speakers, that he placed on either side of the stage. He reportedly cranked them wide open and used his EchoSonic mainly as a preamp. As Moore said, "I had 125 watts, but I still couldn't hear it!"

Only some 68 EchoSonics were built, all hand-made, one at a time. Among those who bought these "'billy-in-a-box" amps were Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison and Luther Perkins. — *Art Thompson*

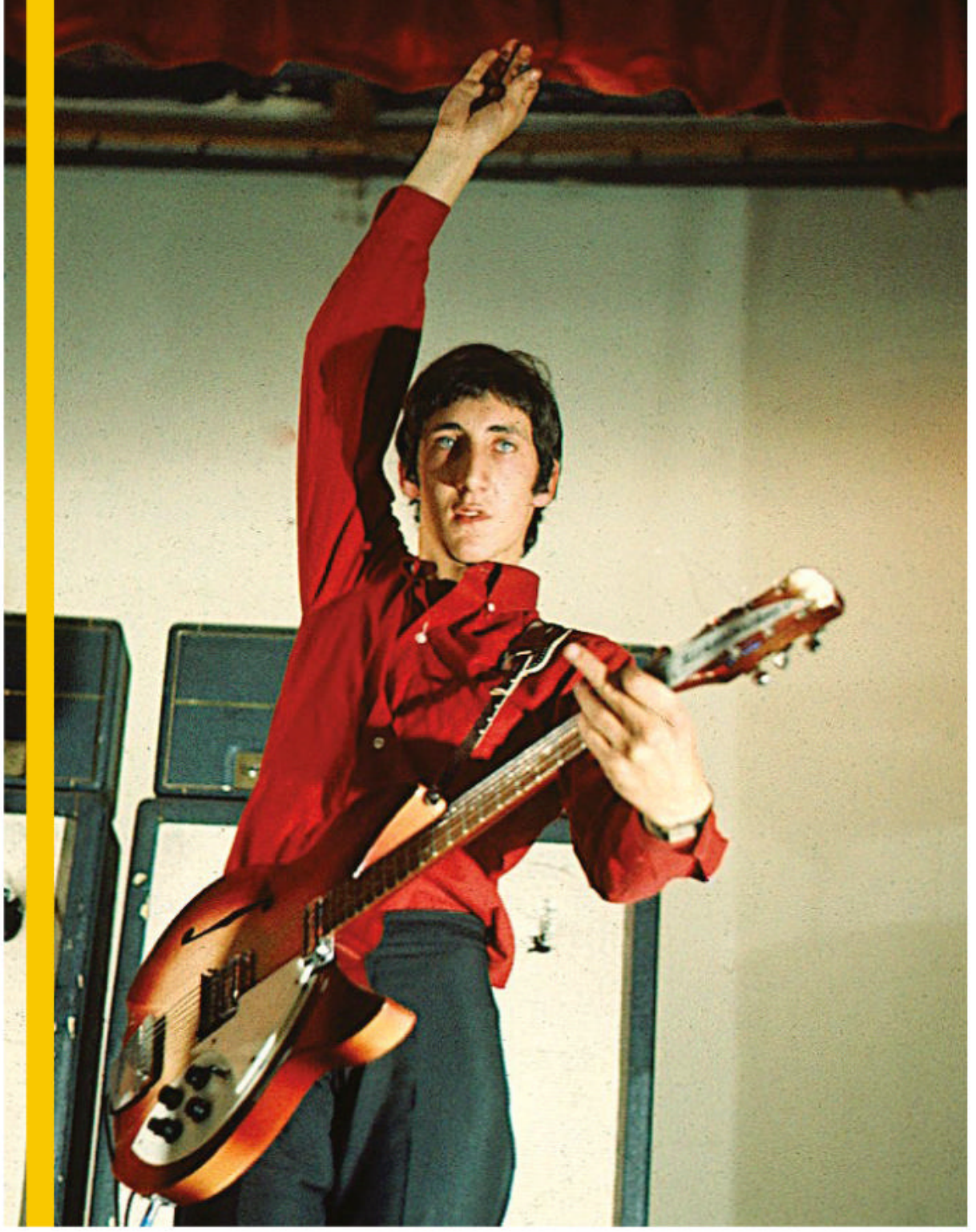
HEAR IT: "Mystery Train," Elvis Presley



Moore and (below) his Echosonic's control panel

JAMES V. ROY

CHARLIE GILLETT/REDFERNS (MACK); MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (MOORE); JOBY SESSIONS (MAGNATONE)



PETE TOWNSHEND

HE WANTED TONE AT EAR LEVEL. ENTER THE MARSHALL STACK

The original Lord of Loud, Pete Townshend was on a mission in 1965 to have the most potent sonic weapon he could unleash on the audience and be heard over Keith Moon's drumming. The guitarist had also realized it was much easier to hear himself and get controllable guitar feedback when his speakers were elevated to ear level.

So he went to Jim Marshall and asked the amp maker to build an 8x12 cabinet to use with the new 100-watt amps Marshall had recently developed at Pete's urging. Since Marshall had already created a 4x12 to use with the JTM-45 head, his solution was to build a straight-front 4x12 and sit the angled-front cab (model 1960A) on top of it. But Pete wanted one cabinet with all eight 12s in it. Told the cabinet would be despised by the roadies for its weight, Townshend snarled, "Sod 'em, they get paid." Marshall made him four 8x12 cabinets, each one open-back on the top half and closed-back on the lower.

After a couple of weeks on the road, Townshend returned and admitted Marshall had been right. He accepted the angled cab atop a straight cabinet, and the "stack" was born. Townshend and Who bassist John Entwhistle were the biggest buyers of the towering Marshall rigs until a misunderstanding caused them to jump ship to Hiwatt. But that's another story. — *Art Thompson*

HEAR IT: "I Can't Explain," *Live at Leeds* — The Who

DICK DALE

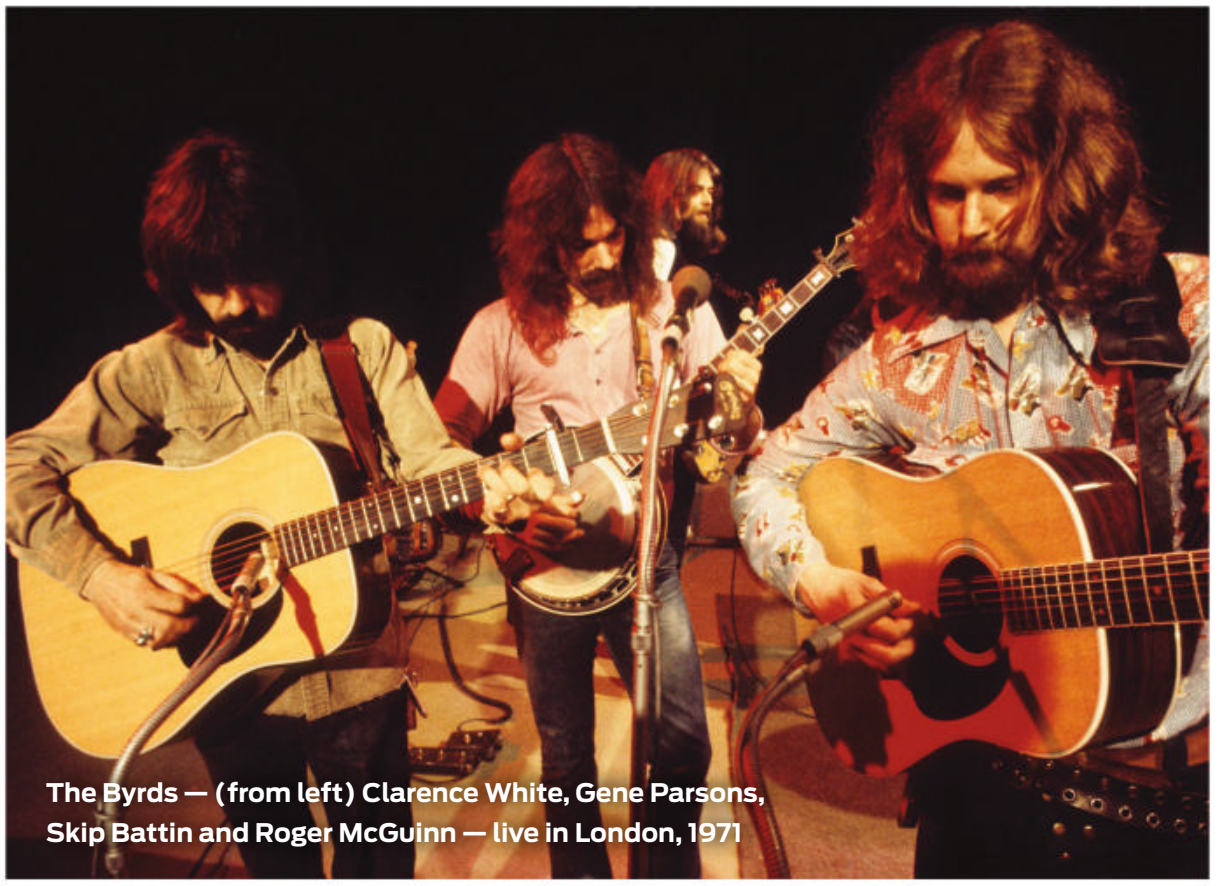
HE PUSHED LEO FENDER TO BUILD THE FIRST BIG-STAGE RIG

HAILED AS THE King of the Surf Guitar, Dick Dale was an avid surfer, whose musical expression was informed by the roil and tumble of the experience. "Surf music is a heavy machine-gun staccato picking style to represent the power of Mother Nature, of our earth, of our ocean," he told *The New York Times* in 1994. Anyone who saw him perform or heard his hits "Let's Go Trippin'", "Jungle Fever," or "Miserlou" will know how fully he succeeded in the effort.

Dale was pummeling his Stratocaster with his band the Del-Tones to crowds of 2,000 to 3,000 surfer-stomping teens in 1961 and '62 when he found his existing Fender amps imploding under the pressure. Fender had unveiled its Showman head and cab in 1960, but Dale called Leo to tell him he needed a sturdier rig. Fender installed a bigger output transformer often known as "the Dick Dale OT" and then conscribed the guitarist to blow through a hundred or so speakers until the custom-made JBL D130F 15-inch finally proved capable of surviving the 85-watt maelstrom (which peaked at well over 100 watts). Partnered with a hulking 2x15 extension cab as the Dual Showman, the big-stage rig had finally arrived, and Dick Dale knew exactly what to do with it. — *Dave Hunter*

HEAR IT: "Jungle Fever," *Surfer's Choice*

CHRIS MORPHET/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (TOWNSHEND); MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (DALE); TOMMIE JAMES (DUAL SHOWMAN)



The Byrds — (from left) Clarence White, Gene Parsons, Skip Battin and Roger McGuinn — live in London, 1971

GUITAR INNOVATORS 25 GUITAR INNOVATORS

GENE PARSONS & CLARENCE WHITE

THEY PUT A MAGIC TRICK IN A STRAP BUTTON, AND THE B-BENDER WAS BORN

As Gene Parsons recalled, it was at a 1967 session that inspiration struck for creation of the B-Bender, a mechanical device that pulls a guitar's B string a step sharp to facilitate the weeping sound of a pedal steel. Parsons and guitarist Clarence White would both join the Byrds' ever-changing lineup the following year as drummer and guitarist, respectively. But on this day they were performing on sessions for a never-released album by country artists Vern and Rex Gosdin when White needed an extra hand to bend a string — likely the B or high E — behind the nut as he played a harmonic. "And then he wanted to do it at the second position and the third position," recalled Parsons, a multi-instrumentalist who played guitar, banjo, pedal steel and drums. "'He said, 'Gee, I wish I could do that, but I'd need a third hand!'" Parsons volunteered his, and the take was soon completed.

Afterward, Parsons, a former machinist, set his mind on devising a mechanism that could pull a string sharp on demand and return it to pitch. His first attempt using a pedal prompted White to complain, "If I wanted to play pedal steel, I'd play pedal steel!" On White's advice, Parsons devised a pull-string mechanism comprising a system of levers, fulcrums and springs that could smoothly raise the pitch of the B string by up to a full step and return it to pitch simply by pushing the neck down and releasing it. The key was the upper-bout strap button, which toggled and served as the system activator.

Parsons' original design used parts from a pedal steel that he'd attached to the back of White's 1954 Fender Telecaster and covered with a wooden frame and Masonite board, doubling the body's depth. Later designs were sleeker and fit inside routings on the back of the body. Parsons went on to retrofit them to order and licensed the design to Dave Evans, who made mods of his own. Among the guitarists to adopt the B Bender are Albert Lee (used on countless tunes), Jimmy Page ("All of My Love" and "Ten Years Gone"), Bernie Leadon (the Eagles' "Peaceful Easy Feeeling") and Marty Stuart, who owns White's original modified '54 Tele, which he calls Clarence. Variations on the design have endured, including models like the Hipshot B-Bender that require no modification, and even double- and triple-benders for G, B and high-E strings. — *Christopher Scapelliti*

HEAR IT: "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere," *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* — The Byrds (Clarence White)

Inside a Paisley Telecaster fitted with a B- and G-Bender.

GIJSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (BYRDS); NEIL GODWIN (TELE)

GUITAR INNOVATORS 25 GUITAR INNOVATORS

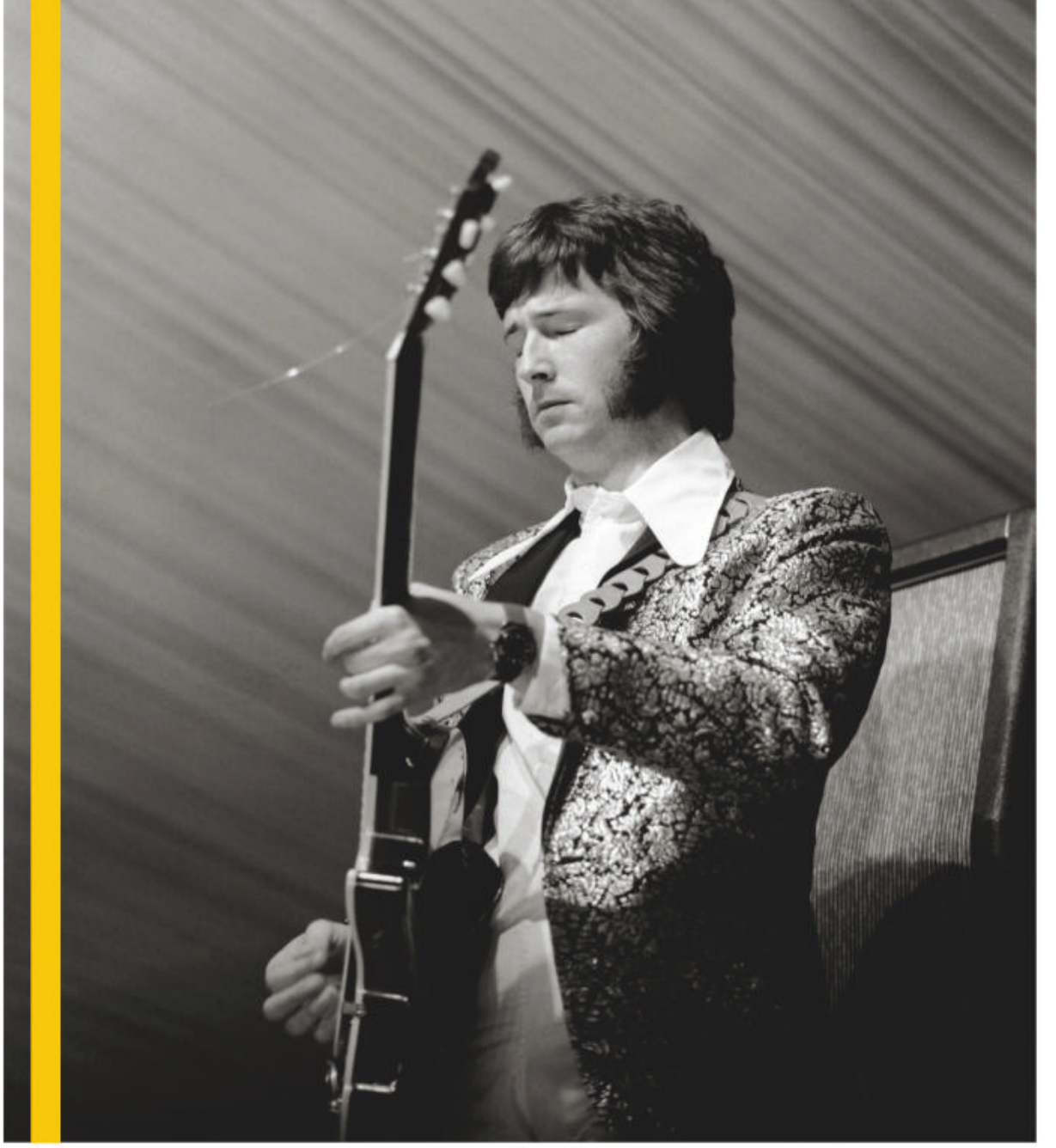
KEITH RICHARDS

HE FOUND SATISFACTION IN MAESTRO'S FUZZ-TONE. EVERYONE ELSE FOLLOWED

The buzzy riff on the Rolling Stones' 1965 hit "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" is deeply engrained in guitar lore, but its creator, Keith Richards, conceived of it as a brass arrangement. "I'd already heard the riff in my head the way Otis Redding did it later, thinking, This is gonna be the horn line," he recalled. When it came time to record the song, Richards plugged his Gibson Firebird VII into a Gibson Maestro FZ-1A Fuzz-Tone to sketch out the part for a later brass overdub, but the sound was so novel that they decided to release the cut as is. Said Richards, "That's the sound that caught everybody's imagination."

Introduced in 1962, the wedge-shaped FZ-1A had front-mounted attack and volume knobs and housed a circuit with three germanium transistors. Gibson had trouble selling it until Keef made fuzz a super-hip thing, prompting guitarists — and other gear makers — to follow suit. — *Art Thompson*

HEAR IT: "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" — The Rolling Stones



ERIC CLAPTON

SLOWHAND TOOK VOLUME TO 11

Rock was rapidly shedding its roll in the mid 1960s, but if we had to name the first guitarist to prominently define rock-guitar tone, it would have to be Eric Clapton. Slowhand was a devotee of the blues and had left the Yardbirds in early 1965 when they adopted a poppier sound. He hitched up with John Mayall's Blues Breakers for some live dates before heading across Europe in a pickup band, but the best part of a year later, he was ready to put some real hair on that blues tone, enforcing new demands on standard studio practices in the process.

In May 1966, Clapton, Mayall, bassist John McVie (later of Fleetwood Mac) and drummer Hughie Flint entered Decca Studios in West Hampstead, London to record their first studio album, *Blues Breakers With Eric Clapton*. The featured guitarist brought with him a Marshall Model 1962 2x12 combo and a sunburst Gibson Les Paul Standard, and declared that he was "going to play loud."

One of the best accounts of the session has Clapton quoting the engineer's recollection, rather than probing his own. As Clapton told Dan Forte for *Guitar Player* in 1985, "I remember reading an interview with [*engineer*] Gus Dudgeon where he said that I put my amp in a certain place, and he went over and put a mic in front of it, and I said, 'No, put the microphone over there on the other side of the room because I'm going to play loud.' I think that sounds like it would be true."

And Clapton did play loud, pushing his 45-watt Marshall combo — forever after known as a Bluesbreaker — into juicy, trenchant overdrive, made all the thicker and creamier by his PAF-loaded Les Paul. Almost overnight, this became the sound burgeoning rockers were chasing the world over. For more than 50 years since, "that tone" has never looked back. — *Dave Hunter*

HEAR IT: "Hideaway," *Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton*

DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (RICHARDS AND CLAPTON); (FUZZ-TONE)

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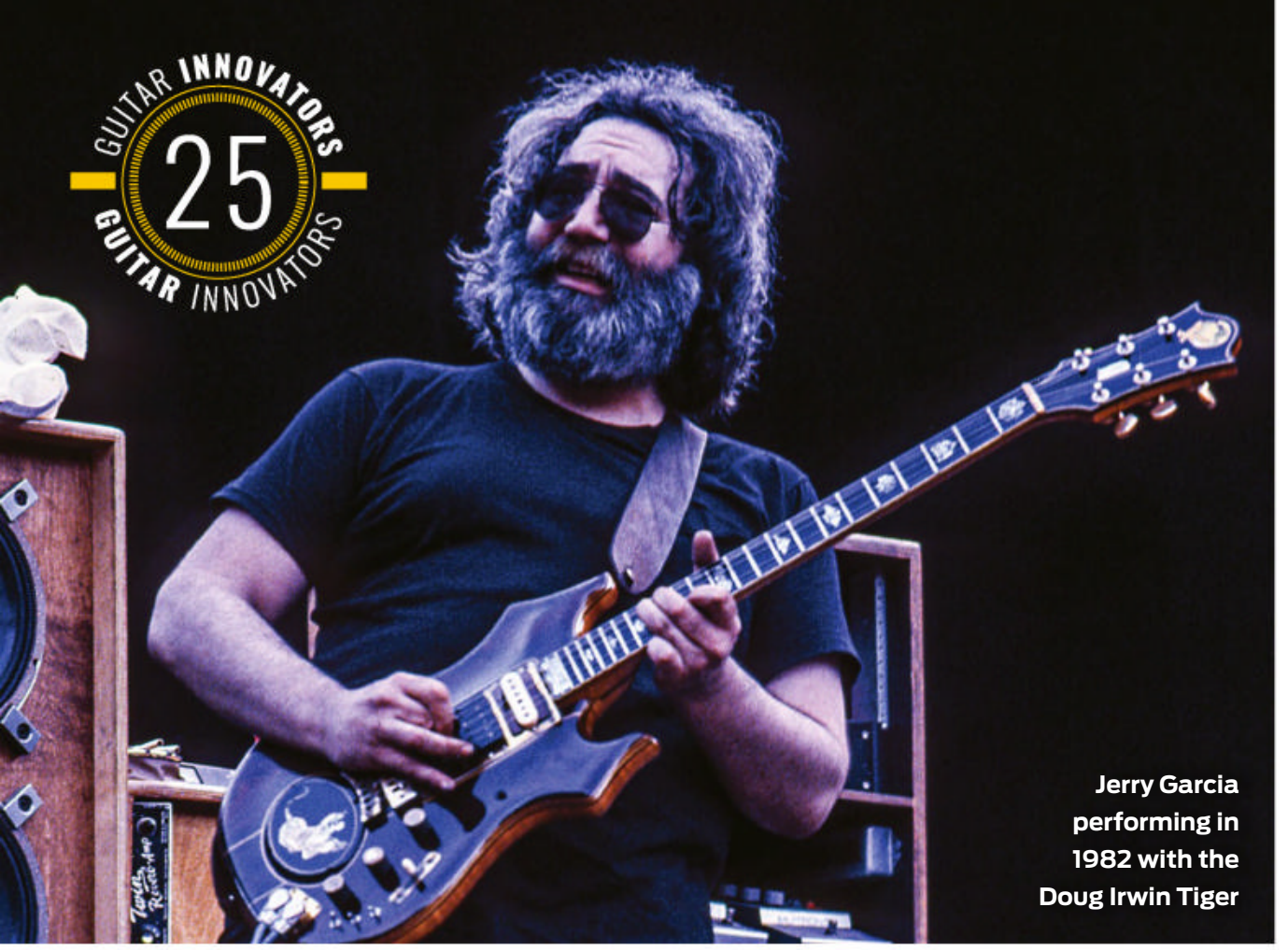


Jerry Garcia performing in 1982 with the Doug Irwin Tiger

JERRY GARCIA

PIONEERING PILGRIM OF CUSTOM GUITARS AND RACK AMPS AND EFFECTS

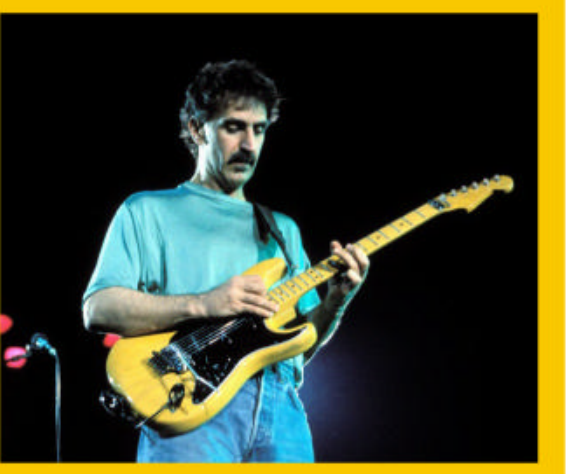
He doesn't get the credit bestowed on legends like Les Paul and Eddie Van Halen, but the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia was key to the development of the custom guitar industry. And he was using rack-mounted amps and effects in the mid 1970s, 10 years before the heyday of rack rigs.

As Chris Gill revealed in *Guitar Aficionado*'s May/June 2014 issue, Garcia started out in the 1960s playing a variety of production models. By the 1970s, however, he found off-the-shelf guitars unsuited to his need for a broader tonal palette. And while most guitarists were happy to switch guitars during a set, Garcia preferred to play just one.

It was Rick Turner at Alembic who, in 1970, gave Garcia his first custom guitar, featuring a mahogany and walnut body of his own design, mated to the neck from an early 1960s Les Paul/SG Custom and featuring three pickups and stereo wiring. His curiosity whetted, in 1971 Garcia asked Turner and Alembic's Frank Fuller to modify his "Alligator" Strat, a gift from Graham Nash built with a '63 ash body and a '57 maple neck, and so named for a cartoon alligator sticker Garcia placed on its pickguard. Turner and Fuller gave it a brass bridge, tailpiece and control panel, as well as an Alembic Strat-o-Blaster preamp that boosted gain. For Garcia, a new era of bespoke axes had begun.

The following year saw him begin his long relationship with guitar maker Doug Irwin, who in 1973 delivered Wolf, a custom axe with a neck-through-body design, the Strat-o-Blaster and three Strat pickups on a plate that could be swapped for another loaded with humbuckers. Irwin would go on to create additional groundbreaking custom guitars for Garcia, including Tiger (inset) — a dazzling piece of luthiery with three pickups, coil taps, a five-position pickup selector and more — and Rosebud, which boasted a Roland GK-2 hexaphonic synth pickup and internally mounted MIDI and synth controls. They are but two of many epic instruments from Garcia's — and the guitar's — long, strange trip. — *Christopher Scapelliti*

HEAR IT: *The Grateful Dead Movie* (featuring Wolf)



FRANK ZAPPA

USED ACTIVE CIRCUITS IN THE SERVICE OF PRECISION TONE AND CONTROLLABLE FEEDBACK

FRANK ZAPPA WAS A demanding composer and performer, and behind his notoriously complex music was a signature guitar tone crafted to his exacting standards with active circuits. As his son Dweezil told *Guitar Player*, "It's really about having the right midrange, and being able to get controllable feedback at will. Frank devised a way to make that happen by fitting his guitars with onboard preamps that put drastic EQ control at his fingertips and kicked out a ridiculous amount of boost — up to 18dB."

Perhaps no guitar of Frank's was as outfitted for EQ tweaking as his custom-made Performance solidbody, used on his last tour, in 1988. In addition to concentric tone controls, it sports parametric filter circuits on screwdriver-adjustable trimpots. "One trimpot is dedicated to frequencies from about 50Hz to 2kHz, and the other one affects the top-end frequencies from about 500Hz up to 20kHz," Zappa's tech, Midget Sloatman, told *GP* in 1995. The filters also featured a variable resonant frequency knob that let Frank control his rig's feedback characteristics for the venue he was playing. "He could basically tune his guitar to the room," Sloatman said, "and use the Q control to elicit the feedback he wanted." For those seeking such exactitude, a range of EQs, from the Boss GE-7 to the Empress ParaEQ, could be just the thing. — *Christopher Scapelliti*

HEAR IT: *Zappa '88: The Last U.S. Show*

ED PERLSTEIN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (GARCIA); DAVID LEFRANC/GAMMA-RAPHO/GETTY IMAGES (TIGER); FRANS SCHELLEKENS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (ZAPPA)

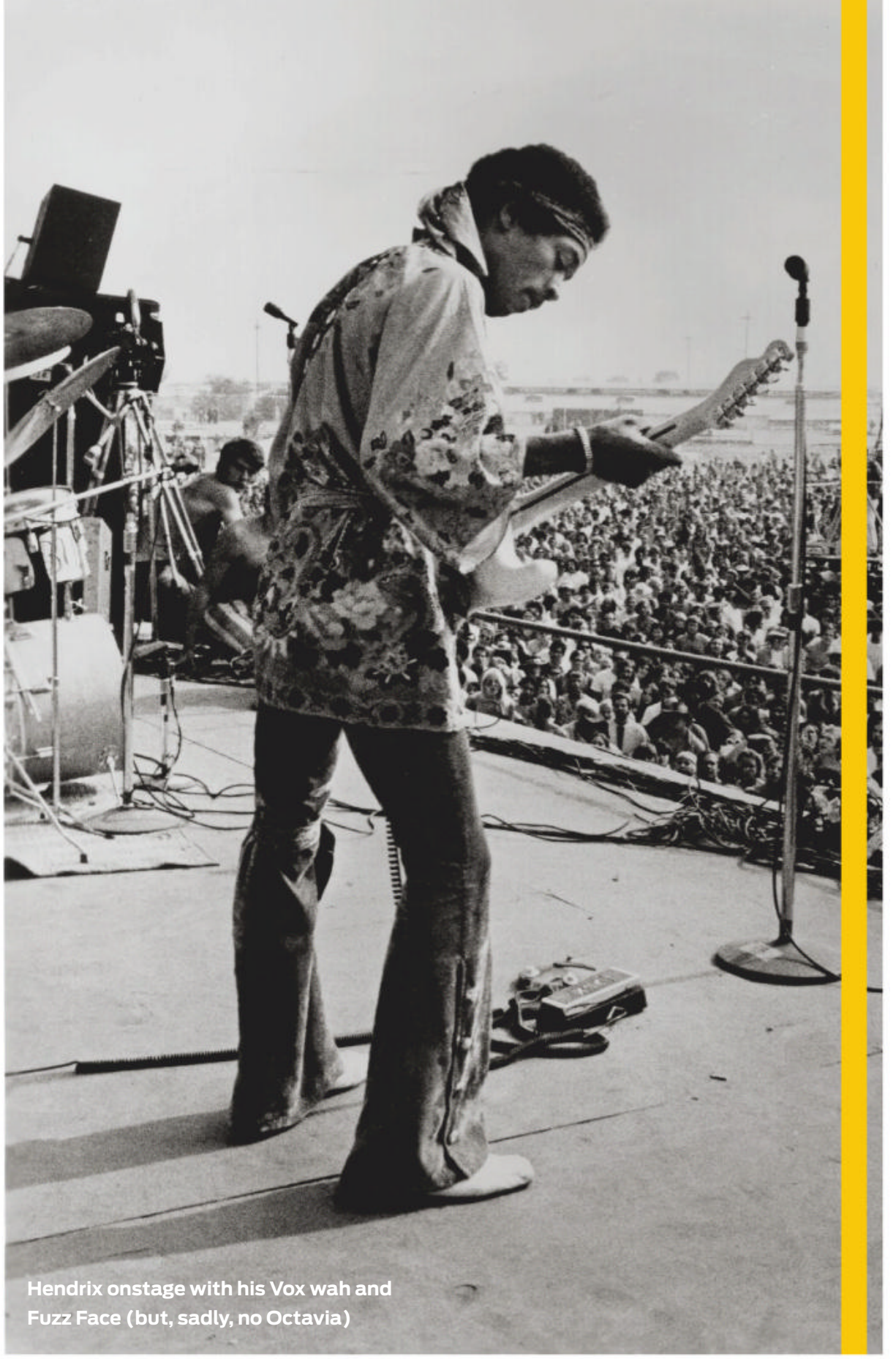
JIMI HENDRIX

HE OPENED THE DOOR TO A NEW WORLD OF TONE WITH ROGER MAYER'S OCTAVIA

It's fitting that an artist as innovative as Jimi Hendrix would land upon a secret weapon to take his sound into another dimension, and that's exactly what the Octavia accomplished. Effects designer Roger Mayer had made fuzz boxes and treble boosters for Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, Ritchie Blackmore, Big Jim Sullivan and others prior to meeting Hendrix in January 1967 and creating his most infamous guitar effect. A month later, Hendrix used the Octavia to usher in a new era of tone via a unique, ringing octave-doubled fuzz sound on the explosive *Are You Experienced* tracks "Purple Haze" and "Fire." The Octavia remained a signature sound for him for the rest of his short career and was heard on songs such as "One Rainy Wish," "Little Miss Lover," "Little Wing" and "Machine Gun," among others.

Mayer says the unit Hendrix used on *Are You Experienced* had germanium transistors and a ferrite transformer. Due to its limited drive capabilities, it was paired with another custom driver in a separate enclosure, which was placed in front of what Mayer refers to as Octavia "Evo1," to give enough drive and extra EQ to produce the sounds Hendrix wanted on his recordings. Mayer says he threw away the first Octavia, but he and Hendrix worked together at a pace that produced at least 15 variations of the device in under a year.

Mayer adds that, by the time they began recording sessions for the Jimi Hendrix Experience's second album, *Axis: Bold As Love*, later in 1967, the effect's clarity and detail were much more defined. Mayer was simultaneously updating and customizing distortion units to complement the latest Octavia revision.



Hendrix onstage with his Vox wah and Fuzz Face (but, sadly, no Octavia)

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES / STRINGER / GETTY IMAGES

"At the end of 1967, I designed the wedge-shaped enclosure, which was manufactured by my father's electronics company," Mayer says. "The Octavia was housed in the new wedge enclosures and still used germanium transistors and ferrite transformers. They were primarily designed for studio work and not suited for touring. I went on tour to the U.S. with Jimi from January 30, 1968, until April 19, 1968, and the wedge-shaped Octavia was used on a few special gigs. We didn't use it every day, owing to the fact they were custom made and couldn't be easily replaced. Having gear stolen from the stage was a real problem, but we never lost an Octavia because Jimi and I kept them with us at all times."

The brilliance of Hendrix and the electronics design acumen of Mayer — arguably the first boutique pedal maker — led to the creation of an effect that still carries a certain mystical quality in how it shape-shifts to the individual player's touch and tone. The product of a unique alliance, the Octavia lives on in myriad forms as produced by Chicago Iron, Fulltone, MXR, Voodoo Lab and others, including the originator himself.

— Art Thompson

HEAR IT: "Purple Haze," *Are You Experienced* — The Jimi Hendrix Experience

GUITAR INNOVATORS 25 GUITAR INNOVATORS

KEVIN GODLEY & LOL CREME

MAD WIZARDS OF THE GIZMOTRON

Lol Creme (left) and Kevin Godley in 1977. Creme's Strat is fitted with the prototype Gizmotron.

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

While the music world was looking to electronic means of reshaping guitar tone in the late 1960s, two young pioneering musicians were seeking a more mechanical route. Kevin Godley and Lol Creme would find fame and fortune in the 1970s as the drummer and guitarist, respectively, for the British art-rock quartet 10cc. But in 1969, several years before they found international fame with the 10cc track "I'm Not in Love," Godley and Creme, along with future band members Graham Gouldman and Eric Stewart, were running Strawberry Studios in England, where they wrote and demoed songs for other performers. In need of a string section for one tune, Godley and Creme pondered whether it were possible to make a guitar sound like an orchestral stringed instrument. "We began thinking that maybe what we were looking for wasn't bowing in a traditional sense" Godley told Tom Avis. "So the thinking was, and it was a very spur-of-the-moment thing, 'What if we got an electric drill and we put a piece of rubber on the end of the drill bit and hold it against the strings?'"

The results were encouraging enough that they hired an engineer to create a prototype device featuring six nylon wheels, each with 48 ridges that worked like tiny guitar picks to pluck a string 100 times per second when pressed into contact with it. The Gizmotron was born. Unlike the EBow, the handheld, monophonic string-sustaining device developed independently at the same time [*see page 50*], the Gizmotron was mounted to the guitar and could be used on all six strings simultaneously. Though it wasn't put into production at the time, the battery-operated hurdy-gurdy made appearances on various 10cc tracks between 1972 and 1976, the heyday of the group's original four-piece lineup.

In 1977, Godley and Creme left 10cc to focus on the Gizmotron and released the album *Consequences* — with contributions from comedian Peter Cook and jazz singer Sarah Vaughan — as a demonstration record for the device. Unfortunately, the Gizmotron was temperamental. "Some days it sounded absolutely beautiful and other days it sounded like shit," Godley said. "Sometimes it was like a chainsaw, and sometimes it sounded like a cello, and other times it varied between the two." Musitronics, maker of the Mu-Tron III, was brought on in 1978 to take the device into production, but the company was sold to synth maker ARP the following year. The device it brought to market was even less musical than Godley and Creme's prototype, and the spinning Delrin wheels wore down quickly in the hands of guitarists who pressed them too forcefully against the strings. ARP recalled the Gizmotron, and by 1981, both were history.

For the next few decades, the Gizmotron was lost to the ages, its canon confined to a few cuts, like the intro of Led Zeppelin's "In the Evening," and the background pads of Paul McCartney's "I'm Carrying," as well as a handful of 10cc tracks. Then, in 2015, Aaron Kipness brought the device to market as the Gizmotron 2.0, a re-engineered version of the original with improved design, performance and sound. He finally got it right — and with Godley's blessing too.

— Christopher Scapelliti

HEAR IT: "In the Evening," *In Through the Out Door* — Led Zeppelin

ROBERT FRIPP

HE MADE LOOPING A THING…BACK IN 1972

Guitarists' fascination with digital loopers over the past decade has its roots in the 1970s ambient work of King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp and ambient pioneer Brian Eno, who had an idea for a music system that, he said, "once set in motion will create music for you." Eno's concept was itself recycled from avant-grade composer Terry Riley's Time Lag Accumulator, a tape delay/feedback system that used two Revox reel-to-reel-tape recorders. The tape supply reel was placed on the first deck, in Record mode, and the take-up reel on the second, in Playback mode, with the tape threaded between the two machines and the output of the second deck fed back to the input of the first. The result was both a delay of several seconds, depending on the distance between the two tape machines, and a buildup of sound from the feedback loop that, together, created a dense ambient drone of the just-past and the now-present performance — an aural pentimento.

Enter Fripp, whom Eno invited to his studio for collaborative experimentation in 1972. Fripp plugged into the system and started to play, with little introduction to the system or rehearsal. The result was "The Heavenly Music Corporation," a tape-delay recording from Fripp and Eno's 1973 debut album, *No Pussyfooting*. "There it was," Fripp declared, "a way for one person to make an awful lot of noise. Wonderful!" The guitarist would make Eno's tape-delay system a central part of his setup for much of the 1970s, dub it Frippertronics, and use it on collaborations with Daryl Hall and Peter Gabriel, as well as his early 1980s albums *God Save the Queen/Under Heavy Manners* and *Let the Power Fall*. Today's digital delays and loopers make it easy to achieve the dense lingering clouds of delay Fripp crafted with analog tape. The guitarist himself moved on long ago. "I'm working with the Electro-Harmonix 16 Second Digital Delay," he told *Guitar Player* in 1986. "It was advertised as a Fripp in the Box," a copy in the hands of an original.

— Christopher Scapelliti

HEAR IT: "The Heavenly Music Corporation," *No Pussyfooting*

CARLOS SANTANA

THE LATIN ROCKER BROUGHT RANDALL SMITH'S MESA/BOOGIE TO THE MASSES

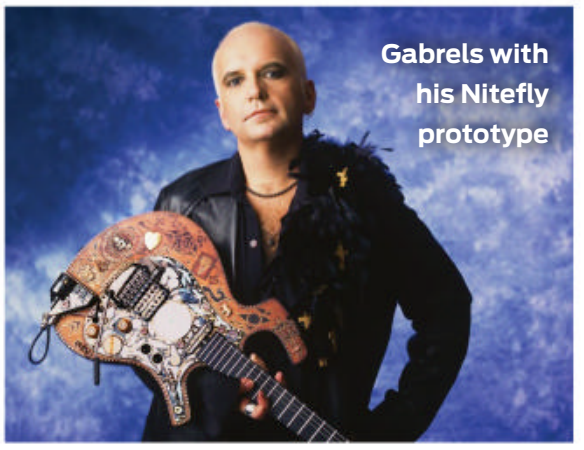
ALTHOUGH IT BECAME one of the hottest amps among pro guitarists from the mid 1970s to the '80s, the Mesa/Boogie seemed utterly designed to propel the singing, sustainful tone and playing style of Carlos Santana, who adopted it as his amp in the 1970s.

For that matter, Santana literally named the thing. Mesa/Boogie founder Randall Smith was working as an amp repairman in 1969 in the small San Francisco shop Prune Music when he decided to play a trick on Barry Melton, lead guitarist with Country Joe and the Fish. Smith gutted Melton's Fender Princeton, installed a modified 50-watt Bassman-style amp, squeezed in a 12-inch speaker and took it to the front of the shop, where Carlos Santana was hanging out. "He just wailed through that little amp until people were blocking the sidewalk," Smith later recalled. "When he stopped playing he turned and said, 'Shit man. That little thing really boogies!'"

As demand grew, Smith continued modifying Princetons. When the supply dried up, he began making the amps — eventually known as the Boogie Mark I — from the ground up. The key to the wailing, saturated tone lay in Smith's chaining together of several tube stages in the preamp, a technique known as "cascading gain," and under the Santana's fingers the result was sustain that could last for days. *—Dave Hunter*

HEAR IT: "Let the Children Play," *Moonflower* — Santana

JEFFREY MAYER/ATLASICONS.COM (FRIPP); COURTESY OF MESA/BOOGIE (SANTANA)


Gabrels with his Nitefly prototype

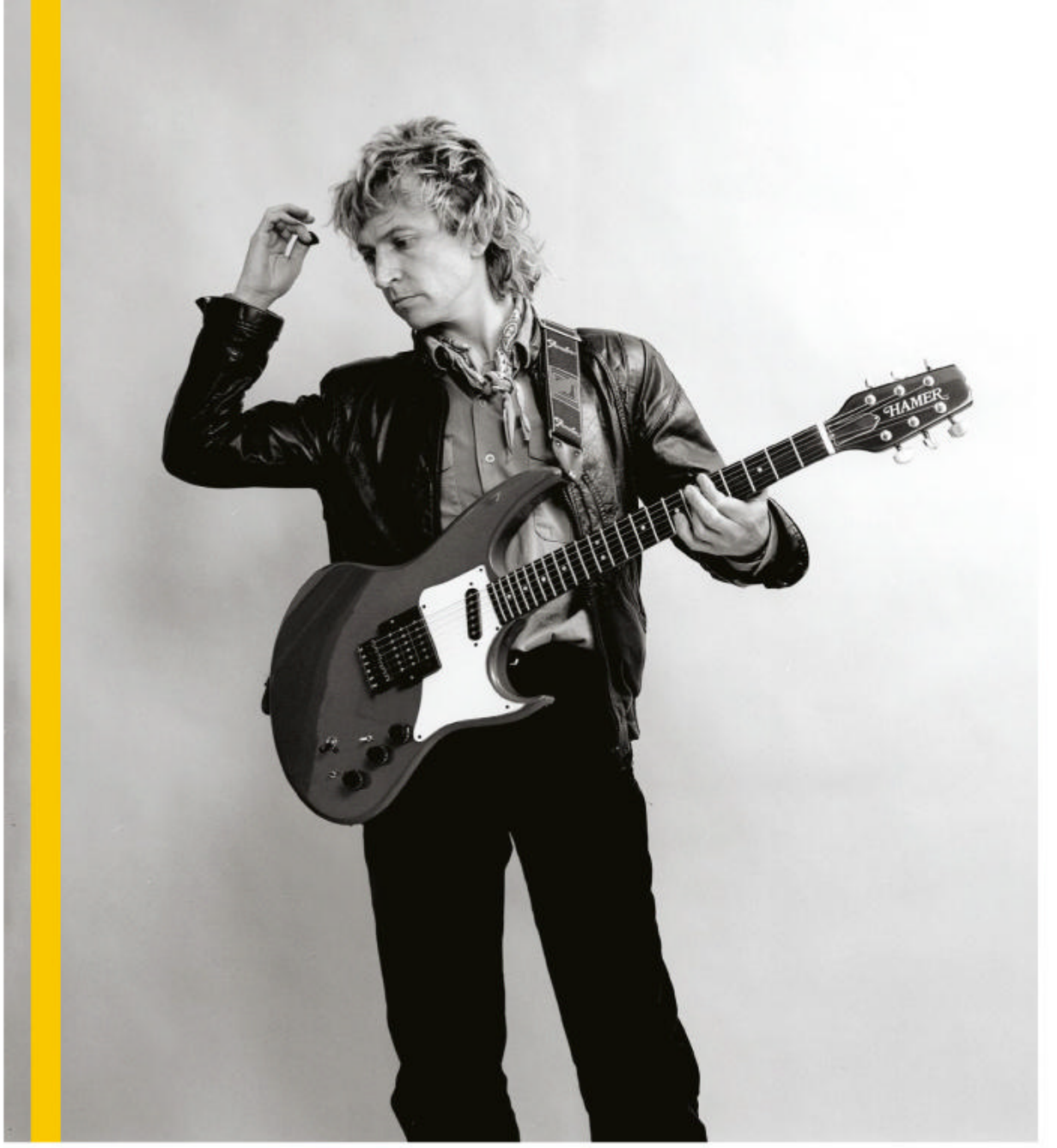
REEVES GABRELS

HELPED THE PARKER FLY GET ITS BUZZ

The Parker Fly had its share of devotees, including Adrian Belew, Vernon Reid, Joe Satriani and Joni Mitchell. But few exploited the tonal possibilities of Ken Parker's groundbreaking axe as Reeves Gabrels did during his tenure with David Bowie. He also had the benefit of playing it well before its 1993 debut. "I knew Ken Parker from when I worked for Fishman in Boston, back when it was a two-man operation," Gabrels told *Guitar Moderne*. "Ken would give me a prototype and say, 'See if you can break this. Tell me what's wrong with it.'"

There was certainly much to like about Parker's eclectic take on the electric. Sporting a carbon/epoxy exoskeleton over a wood core, it weighed about four pounds and had magnetic and piezo pickups, whose signals could be mixed for a wealth of tones. Gabrels posed with Bowie and his Nitefly prototype (decorated with "objects that were thrown at me while I was playing onstage") for our June 1997 cover (inset). — *Christopher Scapelliti*

HEAR IT: "Voyeur of Utter Destruction," *Outside* — David Bowie



ANDY SUMMERS

INSPIRED GUITARISTS TO GIVE CHORUS A SPIN

The Police were one of the most popular bands in the world for several years in the late '70s and early '80s, and Andy Summers's inventive guitar work was a huge part of that success. Although they blended upbeat punk, pop and elements of ska into a sound all their own, each of the three musicians that comprised the lineup — including drummer Stuart Copeland and lead singer/bassist Gordon Sumner (a.k.a Sting) — had backgrounds in jazz and prog-rock. Summers had started gigging with local jazz outfits in his hometown of Bournemouth, England while still in his teens, and moved to London shortly after to join Zoot Money's Big Roll Band. Following stints with Soft Machine and the Animals in the late '60s, he took a left turn by enrolling at the University of California at Los Angeles to major in classical guitar for four years.

By the late '70s, Summers' style and sound were leagues apart from the power chords and extended heavy rock soloing of the day's guitar heroes, his playing laced with atmospherics, jagged rhythmic counterpoint and off-kilter arpeggios. And Boss's revolutionary CE-1 Chorus Ensemble pedal formed a huge part of his signature tone.

Boss parent company Roland first delivered its stereo-chorus circuit within the Roland JC-120 and JC-60 Jazz Chorus amplifiers of 1975. The same effect was packaged into an outboard box as the Boss CE-1 Chorus Ensemble the following year, and a legend was born. Purportedly the first effect to use analog bucket-brigade chips (BBD) in its circuit, the CE-1 has tone that is deep, thick, spatial and multi-dimensional, and while it sounds great in mono, it is truly otherworldly when used in stereo. Summers' creative use of the unit kicked off a chorus pedal revolution that has barely waned to this day. — *Dave Hunter*

HEAR IT: "Message in a Bottle," *Reggatta de Blanc* — The Police

KARJEAN LEVINE/GETTY IMAGES (GABRELS); PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES (SUMMERS)

EDDIE VAN HALEN

TURNED US ON TO THE STRAT 'BUCKER AND FLOYD ROSE

Since the beginning, everything I picked up off the rack at the music store did not do what I wanted it to do," Eddie Van Halen once said, explaining his insatiable interest in tinkering with gear. "Either it didn't have enough of something, or it had a bunch of bozo bells and whistles that I didn't need."

Eddie had to destroy many guitars on the way to making them do what he wanted. He took a chisel to a vintage goldtop Les Paul, enlarging the cavity for the P-90 bridge pickup to accommodate a more powerful humbucker. He was especially fixated on vibrato units, which he used extensively and to dramatic effect in his playing. Frustrated that his Gibson ES-335 went out of tune whenever he pressed its vibrato arm, Eddie cut the tailpiece in half with a hacksaw so that only the top three strings would be affected. "That way I could always go back to the three lower strings to play chords if the vibrato made the high strings go out of tune," he said. "People tripped out on that, but I'd try anything to make something work."

While the Fender Strat's vibrato worked better, the guitar's tone was too thin, even after Ed routed out the body of his '61 model for a bridge-position humbucker. It was here that he began a journey that would lead him to develop his most lasting contributions to guitar technology with Frankenstein, the iconic, red-, black- and white-striped guitar he built from an ash Strat-style body and unfinished maple neck purchased for $50 and $80, respectively. Ed modified the body to accept a humbucker in the bridge position and mounted the pickup from his Gibson ES-335 directly on the wood, improving bass response and sustain. Though certainly not the first guitarist to put a humbucker in a Strat (the MC5's Wayne Kramer did it in the '60s, and many others did before EVH as well), Eddie was the most famous to do so, and he helped popularize the trend.

Frankenstein got Ed closer to the tone he was seeking, but a solution for his whammy-bar problems eluded him. Which is when guitar builder Lynn Ellsworth introduced him to Floyd Rose, who had created a double-locking vibrato system that clamped the guitar strings at both ends to keep them in tune under the most extreme handling. Ed thought that was a pretty good solution, but he had one suggestion.

"My role in the design and development of the Floyd was adding the fine tuners to the bridge," he said. Ed figured the guitar would eventually go out of tune, requiring the player to loosen three screws to free the strings from the nut, then re-attach it once the guitar was back in tune. He couldn't imagine guitarists putting up with it, especially onstage. "There wasn't time to do all this in between songs live," he said. "To put it simply, it was a pain in the ass." With fine tuners, the guitarist could quickly retune with no fuss.

Once Ed mounted the Floyd Rose on his own instruments, it was only a matter of time before the guitar world followed. — *Christopher Scapelliti*

HEAR IT: "Mean Street," *Fair Warning* — Van Halen

A Floyd Rose tremolo bridge on an EVH Striped Series Frankie

OLAF HEINE/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES (EVH); NEIL GODWIN (FRANKIE)

STUART ADAMSON

THE LATE GREAT SCOT TOOK THE EBOW FROM OBSCURITY TO THE HIT PARADE

INVENTED IN 1969 by Greg Heet, the EBow was another device for electric guitar that, like the Gizmotron, attempted to emulate the sound of orchestral strings by producing infinite sustain. While the Gizmotron worked mechanically, the EBow did its thing electronically, using an inductive string driver to form a feedback circuit that would create continuous vibrations when pressed against a guitar string. Early adopters include Blondie's Chris Stein, Blue Öyster Cult's Buck Dharma (who used it to create the sustaining note that ends his solo on "Don't Fear the Reaper") and Bill Nelson, who many consider to be the EBow master.

It was Nelson who introduced it to the guitarist who made the greatest impression with it: Stuart Adamson of the Skids and, later, Big Country. While it's often thought Adamson used an EBow to create the bagpipe-like lead guitar on the hit "In a Big Country," that effect was created with an MXR M-129 Pitch Transposer, chorus and delay. His most evident — and influential — use of an EBow was on the Big Country tracks "Lost Patrol" and "The Storm." More than 50 years on, the EBow's appeal, like its effect, is infinite.

— Christopher Scapelliti

HEAR IT: "Lost Patrol," *The Crossing* — Big Country

TOM SCHOLZ

HIS ROCKMAN WAS THE PRECURSOR TO AMP SIMS AND MULTIEFFECTS

Having scored Platinum record-selling success with his band Boston, MIT-trained engineer Tom Scholz poured the proceeds into Scholz Research & Development in 1980 to create and build music tech products. First came the Power Soak power attenuator that delivered precise control over a rig's global volume. But it was Scholz's follow-up that revolutionized guitar tone in the 1980s. "In 1982 there was no way to practice high-power rock guitar quietly," he explained in a 2020 Facebook post. "What I needed was a way to get that maxed-out overdrive sound in headphones." Scholz also needed to make the device small enough to fit in a guitar case, and affordable.

Using Sony's then-popular, portable Walkman cassette players as his model, Scholz created a stereo headphone amp that featured an amp simulator comprising a compressor, a distortion circuit that offered two clean settings, plus distortion and Edge, and a cab simulator, as well as stereo chorus and echo. Dubbed the Rockman, it ran on eight AA batteries, or AC power via the Rockadaptor. More than a portable practice amp, the Rockman was the first commercial amp simulator and a forerunner of today's multieffects pedals. It didn't take long for guitarists like Phil Collen, Steve Clark and Joe Satriani to realize the Rockman made a great DI for recording. *— Christopher Scapelliti*

HEAR IT: "The Crush of Love," *Dreaming #11* — Joe Satriani

STEVE VAI

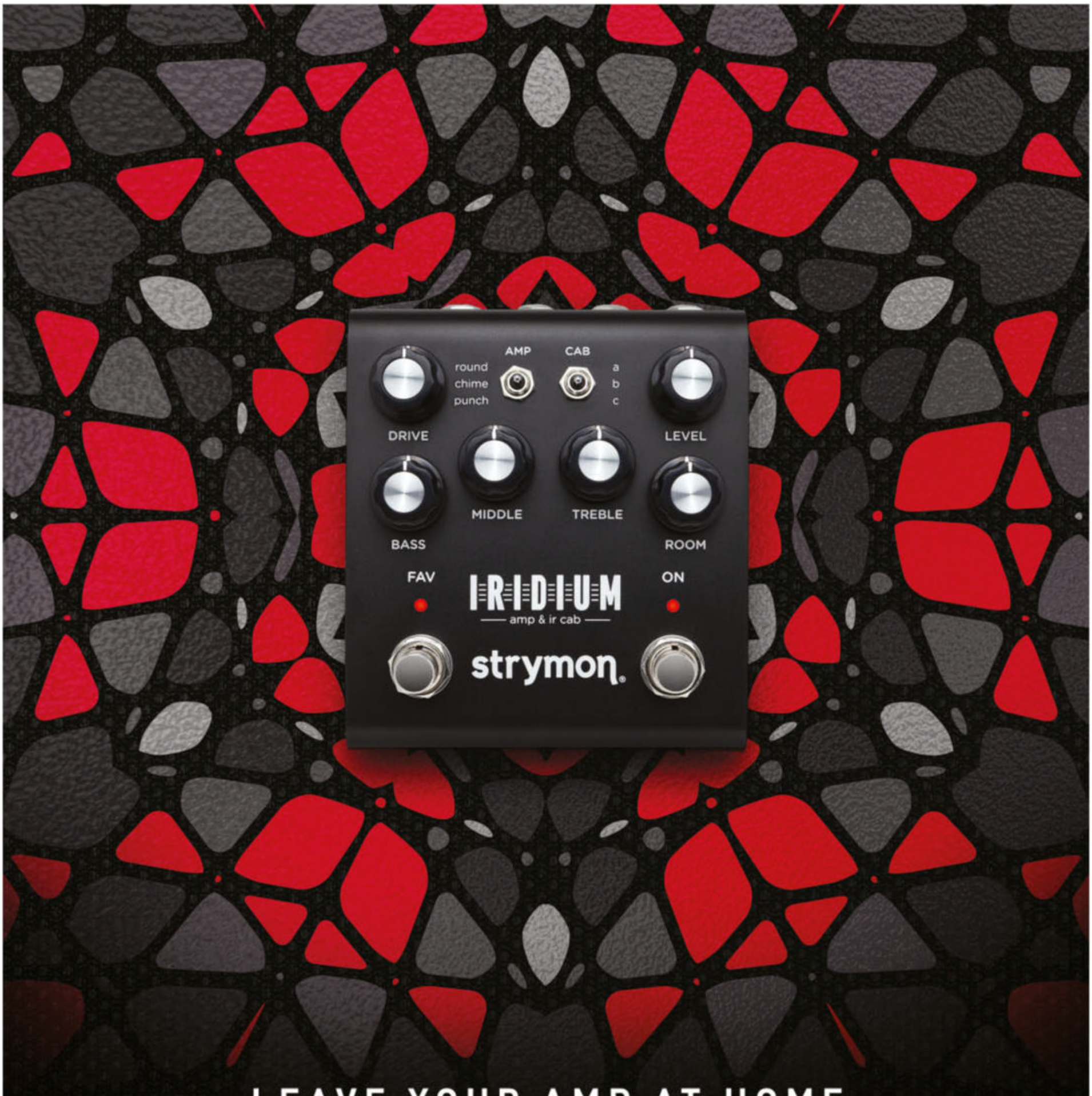
HIS ENDORSEMENT GAVE FERNANDES' SUSTAINER PICKUP STAYING POWER

The quest for violin-like attack and endless sustain seems to have found its apotheosis in this magical magnet. Created by Fernandes, the Sustainer generates a magnetic field that causes a guitar's strings to vibrate, resulting in infinite, controllable sustain. But while predecessors like the Gizmotron and EBow were devised as a means to mimic orchestral strings, the Sustainer's powerful tone has helped it find an audience with shredders, like Steve Vai, who described the pickup's effect on his playing as giving it "a whole new dimension. As a matter of fact, it's sort of a dimension of slow motion. I actually can play long slow notes now."

Vai equipped several of his signature guitars with Sustainers, including FLO (a 77FP JEM transformed to 7VWH spec), FLO III (a basswood Ibanez Los Angeles Custom Shop JEM 7VWH), and BO (a JEM77BRMR prototype), but he has since moved on to the Sustainiac brand, with whom he's developing a new sustainer pickup. "I've used Fernandes sustainers, but I can't put them on my signature guitars because I can't get enough of them and they're not consistent," he told *Guitar Player* in late 2020. "And there was always something about the Sustainiac that I like. It was a different feel and a different voice. So I decided to work with them to create something that really suits my needs in a sustainer." *— Christopher Scapelliti*

HEAR IT: "For the Love of God," *Passion and Warfare* — Steve Vai

KARJEAN LEVINE/GETTY IMAGES (SCHOLZ); BOB KING/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (VAI); NICK ELGAR/CORBIS/VCG/GETTY IMAGES (ADAMSON)



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JACK WHITE

MADE CHEAP GUITARS COOL (AND EXPENSIVE)

As most fans will agree, never has so mighty a sound been made on so humble an instrument. But it would be difficult to call Jack White's 1964 Montgomery Ward Airline Res-O-Glas cheap anymore, after his use of the '60s catalog fodder sent values and collectibility soaring sky high. From the start, though, the White Stripes' ethos was firmly rooted in the power of minimalism, and giving the band's sparse ingredients room to breathe often translated "less is more" into "less is huge!"

White wasn't the first guitarist to discover the conversely massive, dynamic tone that an erstwhile cheapo instrument can generate, but when he strapped on his red Res-O-Glas beauty, the guitar world quickly recognized the full achievement of this silk-purse-out-of-sow's-ear-like conversion. The fiberglass body, assembly-line construction, and dual Valco single-coil pickups (humbuckerish though they appear) add up to an edgy, characterful snarl, and definitely get the big riffs across.

A big part of this guitar's appeal for White seems to be that it's not an easy or forgiving instrument to play. As he told *Guitar Player* in 2010, "I always look at playing guitar as an attack. It has to be a fight. Every song, every guitar solo, every note that's played or written has to be a struggle… The idea behind using the Ward's Airline in the White Stripes was to prove that you don't need a brand-new guitar to have character, to have tone, and to be able to play what you want to play. You can do it with a piece of plastic."

The fact that White's playing has sent the desirability of such plastic — or fiberglass — guitars off the charts doesn't change the principle behind the sentiment, and he deserves double credit for once again affirming that the music is in the heart, mind and fingers of the maker, and not the price tag of the instrument. — *Dave Hunter*

HEAR IT: "Dead Leaves and the Dirty Ground," *White Blood Cells* — White Stripes

The red pedal never leaves Morello's board.

TOM MORELLO

WIZARD OF THE WHAMMY PEDAL

IF YOU PLAYED guitar in the 1980s and wanted to harmonize your playing, you had to buy a pricey rack unit or recruit another guitarist. In 1989, DigiTech's bright-red Whammy Pedal changed all that by offering foot-controlled pitch-shifting effects, including Detune, Harmony and Whammy, which emulates the effect of using the vibrato bar but over a range up to two octaves. Dive bombs, pitch bends and instant harmonies — all this and more was on tap, and that was before later models allowed chordal pitch shifting.

The Whammy Pedal's glitchy tones and ear-piercing squeals were quickly recruited by players like Pantera's Dimebag Darrell, Joe Satriani and Steve Vai, but even old-guard players like Jimmy Page and David Gilmour, and late-'90s young bucks like Jack White were drawn to the pedal's magic.

Few, however, made more distinctive use of the Whammy than Tom Morello. The Whammy came along at the perfect time for the guitarist, who formed Rage Against the Machine in 1991, and he used the pedal to jump a fifth, seventh or two octaves as he emulated the synthy swoops and portamento glides he heard on Southern California gangster-rap cuts by rappers like Dr. Dre. "I was really excited by the prospect of playing hip-hop music within the context of a punk rock band, and I wasn't going to make any excuses for there not being a DJ," he said. "At that time, my chief influences were Terminator X and Jam Master J, and I was determined to recreate the record scratching, DJ stuff — those rich, bizarre textures — on my guitar." Morello has continued to use the Whammy in his later work with Audioslave and Prophets of Rage, and it remains one of just four pedals — along with a wah, phaser and delay — that have comprised his pedalboard for more than 30 years. — *Christopher Scapelliti*

HEAR IT: "Like a Stone," *Audioslave* — Audioslave

GIE KNAEPS/GETTY IMAGES (WHITE STRIPES); KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES (MORELLO)

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THE GHOST OF SKIP JAMES

Washed up at age 30, James was rediscovered in 1964, just five years before his death. His impact is felt stronger than ever today in Bentonia blues.

BY JIM BEAUGEZ

Skip James performing at the Newport Folk Festival, Newport, Rhode Island, July 1964

A YEAR BEFORE BOB DYLAN went electric with a Tobacco 'burst Fender Stratocaster at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, a bluesman who hadn't recorded and had rarely performed since the 1930s stunned the festival's crowd of 15,000 spectators with an electrifying performance of his own.

Just weeks earlier, Nehemiah Curtis "Skip" James had been recovering from cancer treatments in a Tunica, Mississippi hospital when John Fahey and two friends tracked down the 61-year-old legend and persuaded him to play again. His re-emergence came during the 1960s blues revival at a time that also saw the "rediscovery" of Bukka White, Son House, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Mississippi John Hurt and others, who played to new audiences and scored record deals.

Armed only with an acoustic guitar and a microphone, Skip James captivated the Newport audience with his high falsetto and spidery fingerpicking that often commanded all 10 of his fingers. "Skip at Newport '64 was just transcendent. It was incredible," recalls Dick Waterman, who witnessed the performance and later managed James' career until his death in 1969. "He sat down and he set his fingers down on the fretboard, and he took a breath and hit the first note of 'Devil Got My Woman,' and it was just incredible. Just shivers even at the memory of it."

It's safe to say no one else at Newport was playing guitar the way James did at the time — not House and not White, who were also on the bill in 1964. Instead of the more commonly used open-G and open-E major-key tunings, James played in a D-minor tuning, which lent songs like "Hard Time Killing Floor" and "Cypress Grove" an ominous tone. The tuning was so particular that it became associated with Bentonia, Mississippi, James' hometown, through a succession of players.

"In other regional styles of Delta blues, you may have an open-tuned guitar where the minor gets introduced against the major chord," says Ryan Lee Crosby, a Massachusetts-based blues artist who

(from left) Yank Rachel, Mississippi John Hurt, James, Elizabeth Cotten, Doc Reese and Sleepy John Estes pose for a portrait at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival.

DAVID GAHR/GETTY IMAGES

learned Bentonia blues from Jimmy "Duck" Holmes, the last living musical link to James. "But in the Bentonia style, it's a minor chord, where major notes get added on top, so the tension between the major and minor is inverted."

This differentiator sets up the darker, minor-key sound of Bentonia standards, but there are also other structural differences — or, rather, a lack of structure, as there are no choruses and few turnarounds in Bentonia blues, and no set number of times to repeat a pattern. The droning, hypnotic tones come from ringing the open strings with the thumb or forefinger while fingerpicking, and frailing across the strings with the others.

While James doesn't have the household-name recognition of B.B. King, Muddy Waters or Robert Johnson, his influence has never been stronger among blues and folk musicians. The Carolina Chocolate Drops, a folk collective that launched the careers of Rhiannon Giddens, Dom Flemons and Leyla McCalla, carries his penchant for freeform, minor-key romps. Emerging blues guitarists and singers like Buffalo Nichols and Adia Victoria wear his influence even more prominently.

"I came into Skip James' music at the perfect time in my life," says Victoria, who discovered him around the time she got her first guitar, at age 21. "I felt spoken to in a way that I'd never felt spoken to. I felt reached and seen. And I felt like, through Skip James, I became more in touch and aware of my culture as a Black southerner, in a way that I hadn't been before."

James' 1960s revival didn't last long. Before his cancer roared out of remission in 1967, his handlers squandered the considerable buzz he had created at Newport. By the time Waterman helped him get a record contract in late 1965, more palatable blues artists like Hurt were getting more attention, gigs and money. It didn't help that James, by all accounts, was a proud man who felt his playing was of higher artistic merit than his contemporaries on the folk blues scene.

"He was a very different, difficult, contrary kind of person," Waterman says. "In other words, Skip had a huge ego and he loved to be flattered, and the best way to get along with Skip was to be flattering and tell him how great he was. He felt he himself was performing at a much, much higher level, which may or may not be true, depending on how you look at it. He definitely was not 'one of the guys.'"

(clockwise from top left) The Roosevelt Roberts Band at the Blue Front Café, April 2013; Jimmy "Duck" Holmes outside the Blue Front, 2013; the juke joint's facade

Bentonia, Mississippi, sits atop the hills that rise above the vast alluvial Delta, where blues music evolved at sharecropper plantations and juke joints, makeshift venues where laborers could find music and moonshine. Like many former farming outposts across the South, Bentonia is bisected by a railroad whose trains don't bother stopping anymore. The only thing riding these rails are freighters headed north and south on the same tracks that dropped Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf in Chicago.

The Blue Front Café, considered the oldest juke operating in Mississippi, still stands next to the tracks in the center of town. Behind the cinderblock façade and barred front doors, locals mosey in to buy cigarettes and sundries, lingering sometimes to talk to the proprietor, Jimmy "Duck" Holmes. At 74, Holmes is not only an elder statesman — he's also the last of the Bentonia bluesmen.

"SKIP AT NEWPORT '64 WAS JUST TRANSCENDENT. IT WAS INCREDIBLE"
— Dick Waterman

The walls of the Blue Front are covered with faded posters and snapshots of the Bentonia Blues Festival, which Holmes has run for five decades. Music equipment is everywhere — microphone stands at half mast, guitars mounted onto the cinderblock and

MICK GOLD/GETTY IMAGES (BLUE FRONT)

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL

From Satan to Jesus, Skip played through shadow and light on these five essential tracks.

MISSISSIPPI DELTA BLUESMAN

Robert Johnson may have sung about having a hellhound on his trail, but Skip James sounded like the one on the run. During his lifetime, James alternated between shadow and light in his performances, ranging from the wrenching "Devil Got My Woman" to the rolling gospel "Jesus Is a Mighty Good Leader." His D-minor guitar tuning and high, ghostly singing style gave these compositions gravitas as his fingerstyle technique propelled them forward, all while never committing to a definitive structure for any of his songs.

James traveled from Bentonia, Mississippi to Grafton, Wisconsin in 1931 and recorded 18 sides for Paramount Records, but after his recordings failed to sell, he found his way to the ministry and became a preacher like his father. When he stepped back onstage in 1964, his music found rapturous audiences and he re-recorded many of his early songs, along with a few new cuts, for the albums *Today!* (1966) and *Devil Got My Woman* (1968).

Musically, we're left with two portraits of the artist: the first in 1931, when he was 29, and the second in the mid 1960s, near the end of his life. Ryan Lee Crosby, an accomplished fingerstylist, songwriter and student of Jimmy "Duck" Holmes, the last remaining Bentonia bluesman, has studied both eras of James' recordings and performances.

"Those Paramount recordings have so much urgency, and he plays really fast," says Crosby, whose album *Winter Hill Blues* comes out in May 2022. "It's almost like he puts the brakes on the momentum of his playing [*in the 1960s*], or he'll stall things and let a bass note pop out in a way that I feel is really different from his early playing."

Here, Crosby offers insights into five essential Skip James songs and how his performances evolved over the decades.

"DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN"

"Devil Got My Woman," sometimes referred to as "Rather Be the Devil" after its opening line, is one of James' best-known songs. The tension he builds in the descending riff resolves at the end of each line, but James hangs onto the chord while he sets up the next line with similarly structured licks.

> **"SKIP USED HIS FINGERS IN A WAY THAT SHARES A LITTLE MORE WITH PIEDMONT STYLE THAN MISSISSIPPI DELTA"**

"When I think of Skip, it's his really articulate, complicated fingerstyle playing," Crosby says. "There's a particular kind of articulation to how he plays that I feel is directly related to using multiple fingers, a little bit of an alternating bass. The 1930s one I think is a little more driving, yet a little more syncopated, and he emphasizes the rhythm in a way that is different from any other version I've heard. On the '66 recording, I feel like he lets things breathe a little bit. There is a freer quality to it. It's more spacious."

"HARD TIME KILLIN' FLOOR BLUES"

One of the earliest and best-known riffs in the blues canon, "Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues" sounds as desolate and dark as a windswept winter night. Although Willie Dixon served as the inspiration and origin for some of Led Zeppelin's early work, Jimmy Page echoes James' minor step-down here on "Dazed and Confused" from *Led Zeppelin I*, a motif that resurfaces again and again across the hard-rock and metal canon.

"When you hear Jimmy [*'Duck' Holmes*] and Jack Owens play 'Hard Times,' or 'Hard Time Killin' Floor,' you can hear how connected they are," Crosby says. "But Skip's way of playing it is really quite different. Skip has entirely different melodies, and the harmonic qualities of it are different. He has a bass line in his version, and he voices the chords differently. He has these almost suspended-sounding chords when he's singing in the early version, and he slides between the notes in a way where it's almost like he's speeding up and slowing down the feeling of time. He was his own person within the tradition."

"I'M SO GLAD"

One of the most joyous songs in James' catalog, "I'm So Glad" anticipates the return of a lover while, underneath his singing, James scurries along the fretboard with fleet finger work.

"'I'm So Glad' is a great example of how he's doing these complicated articulations of octaves and chords," Crosby says. "Skip used his fingers in a way where you might almost say it shares a little more with Piedmont style than some of the Mississippi Delta stuff. You get these articulations of chords that have different rhythmic feelings and like a rolling quality, and that's really on display in 'I'm so Glad.' 'Illinois Blues' has some of that too, and certain ways in which he will roll his thumb across the strings."

DEREK BATT (VICTRORIA) MERRICK ALES (NICHOLS)

JAN PERSSON/GETTY IMAGES

Skip James performs on a Copenhagen TV special while touring Europe in the American Folk Blues Festival, November 1967.

"CYPRESS GROVE"

In the version of "Cypress Grove" on *Today!*, James played in a more relaxed manner and his note choices sound less urgent and more whimsical than on the Paramount recording. His rhythm swings. His voice doesn't sink under the weight of his lyrics, but seems to rise, confident and no longer burdened. Crosby explains how he got there.

"Typically in the blues, you'd have a flat third and a flat seven," he says. "In the Bentonia style, the guitar is tuned to the minor tuning, and there is that kind of oscillating between the major and minor third," he says. "But in 'Cypress Grove,' Skip hits a natural seventh in the main riff of that song where he's playing between his singing, and that gives it, to my ear, a little bit of an Eastern thing. He's in the minor tuning with the natural seventh. I can't think of too many other blues songs that sound like that."

"SPECIAL RIDER BLUES"

Although not a particularly famous cut, "Special Rider" stands out in James' oeuvre for its open-G tuning, a rare departure from his other work in D-minor. His rhythm, Crosby explains, has a different groove, as well. "A lot of the cross-note stuff, especially on the 1931 recordings," he says, "to me feels weighted. There's that forward momentum and a driving and an urgency to the cross-note stuff. But it feels really heavy to me, too.

"'Special Rider' has a little bit of a lightness and a jagged, sort of pointed quality to the riff. You see in 'I'm So Glad' he's playing a lot of octaves and he's moving them across the fretboard, and pairing octaves with open strings. But in 'Special Rider,' he's doing some straight barre chords. It's just got a completely different tone, different groove, and another angle on the fingerpicking." *—Jim Beaugez*

(clockwise from top left) Adia Victoria, Buffalo Nichols and Ryan Lee Crosby with Maya Kyles

shiplap walls, a pair of dusty Peavey amplifiers on the floor under a pile of cables. On a folding card table, copies of his eighth album, the Grammy-nominated *Cypress Grove* (Easy Eye Sound, 2019), are stacked for sale. Holmes recorded the collection of potent and haunted performances from the Bentonia canon — the title track, "Hard Times" and "Devil Got My Woman" were part of the original 26 sides James recorded for Paramount Records for $40 in 1931 — with the Black Keys at Dan Auerbach's studio in Nashville.

"There's an urgency with getting any of these types of people in the studio, older musicians that are sort of one of a kind," Auerbach says. "The whole thing just felt like a blessing, really, just to be able to get to do it. And to share the love of the music and live in Jimmy's world for a little bit."

Holmes didn't learn the Bentonia blues from James, who played the Blue Front occasionally. James and another Bentonia artist, Jack Owens, both learned from a man named Henry Stuckey, who lived in the area and, for a time, on the Holmes farm. Stuckey allegedly learned the open D-minor tuning from a group of Bahamian soldiers he met in France during World War I and brought it home.

"HIS STORYTELLING WAS AS BRILLIANT AS HIS GUITAR PLAYING, AND VICE VERSA" — *Adia Victoria*

Owens began to teach Holmes off and on beginning in the late '70s, and by the '90s the pair were playing daily at the Blue Front. "I picked up some licks from him, which I was doing all along, but he was a hard act to follow," Holmes says. "He wanted me to learn it, and I think now, from a divine perspective, he wanted me to learn it but he didn't know how to teach it. He would come every day and say, 'Boy, let's play. You've got to learn to do this.'"

Over the past few years, Holmes has taken on the role of instructor to younger players who visit him at the Blue Front. Robert Connelly Farr, a Mississippi native who lives in Vancouver, B.C., reinterprets his lessons into thunderous back-alley blues, while Mike Munson's adaptations are fully absorbed into his singer-songwriter compositions. Ghalia Volt, who honed her one-woman-band craft while busking in Brussels, Belgium, frequently shows up to perform at the juke.

DEREK BATT (VICTORIA); MERRICK-ALES (NICHOLS)

Neither Victoria nor Nichols have made a similar pilgrimage to Bentonia, but James' influence is a strong undercurrent in both artists' music. On *A Southern Gothic* (Warner Bros.), Victoria's third album, the Bentonia sound manifests in the eerie tension, tuning and fingerpicking on songs like "Magnolia Blues" and "Carolina Bound." "That D-minor tuning lends itself to some of the more melancholic aspects of human emotion, and combining that tuning with his voice, that falsetto, was very plaintive, mournful, but it could also sound manic, as well," Victoria says. "His style of singing is what my internal voice sounded like. You can hear that weariness. You can hear that wisdom and that defiance, as well. It's like a combination of dark and light that really spoke to me — that startled me, really."

Nichols discovered James on a blues compilation when he was 12 or 13, he says, but didn't seek out a full James collection for another five years. As a metalhead at the time, Nichols was already familiar with drop-D tuning, so transitioning to open D-minor tuning wasn't too much of a stretch. He eventually left behind his shredding for the organic tones of an acoustic guitar and a country-folk blues sound. For Nichols, the most enduring influence of James on his own playing isn't what he played as much as his individualism.

"Whenever he would play songs that weren't his, he would always make sure to play in his own style," Nichols says. "That's always stuck with me, because I've never really been the type to learn other people's music. The two or three Skip James songs that I play are the two or three that I know. This music to me is supposed to be individual and be about the expression of the player."

True to his word, on his cover on the James composition "Sick Bed Blues" from his 2021 self-titled debut album (Fat Possum), Nichols speeds up the tempo and improvises on the original licks with his own slide-accented descending figure. Such improvisation is a central feature of the Bentonia sound. Holmes maintains that the songs are impossible to transcribe because they're never played the same way twice. That's due in part to playing from the heart, he says, but also because guys like Owens were uneducated. "If you told Jack Owens, 'I want you to do four counts of 'Hard Times,' he wouldn't know what you're talking about," Holmes says. "'Uh, can you run me an E chord?' Have no idea what you're talking about. Even though he could do it, but he was unaware he was doin' it."

Adds Nichols, "You hear the way he plays, and the biggest challenge is you can't really sit down and transcribe it because it's not very predictable. The way he's going to play, it all relates to the way he sings, and if you hear him do three recordings of the same song, it's always going to be a little different. I had to unlearn a lot of the sort of technical precision and rely more on the feeling of it."

James at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival.

Victoria agrees that playing the music riff-for-riff is missing the point. James understood how to use the guitar to serve his purpose of telling honest stories. Emulating him or anyone else takes the heart out of the music. "Skip James' music is an invitation to use your imagination to press forward in what he did," she says. "He's already done that. He's mastered that, so there's no point in trying to replicate it. But I think that he still serves a valuable lesson of how can you give sound to your mood and your world, and how can you swathe your storytelling in this oral blanket.

"And to stay out of your way," she adds. "If the story is good, the guitar should serve you. The guitar should never be a crutch behind a lack of insight in your story. I think that was the brilliance of Skip James. His storytelling was as brilliant as his guitar playing, and vice versa."

"HE FELT HE HIMSELF WAS PERFORMING AT A MUCH, MUCH HIGHER LEVEL. HE DEFINITELY WAS NOT 'ONE OF THE GUYS'"
— Dick Waterman

JAZZ *ODYSSEY*

Freedom has been on a lot of people's minds the past two years. Jazz-fusion pioneer **John McLaughlin** made it the topic of his latest solo album, *Liberation Time*.

BY MARK McSTEA

JOHN McLAUGHLIN'S NEW album, *Liberation Time*, is his response to the tribulations of the past two years, in a world turned upside down by Covid. With the cancellation of two tours, and finding himself with time on his hands in Monaco, where he has lived for many years, McLaughlin was, by his own admission, starting to go crazy. Out of his frustration came inspiration, and he started to create a collection of positive, upbeat and joyful tracks that were a celebration of life. Indeed, joy is something central to McLaughlin's existence. Inspired by nature and life, he finds positivity in the wonders of the universe. That optimistic and grateful attitude is expressed perfectly on an album that contains some of the guitar master's most direct and affecting music.

No stranger to readers of *Guitar Player*, McLaughlin has been a mainstay of the jazz and fusion scene for

(opening page) John McLaughlin with his Rex Bogue Double Rainbow double-neck guitar, at Sydney airport for the launch of his Australian tour, November 6, 1974

more than 50 years. Prior to his profile-raising tenure with Miles Davis, McLaughlin had been a member of Brit jazz pioneer Graham Bond's band, and had worked as a session guitarist on numerous hit singles in 1960s Britain. Leaving Davis to start his own band, McLaughlin ultimately took fusion to the next level with the global success of Mahavishnu Orchestra. Always a musical purist, he followed that by forming Shakti, exploring the boundaries of Indian music and jazz. Although the band was not as commercially viable as Mahavishnu, McLaughlin was undeterred; his only focus then, as now, has been musical integrity. He has continued to be prolific. Always active on the live and recording fronts, he shows no signs of slowing down and continues to follow his muse regardless of commercial considerations or musical fashions.

Given that *Liberation Time* was recorded during lockdown, did everybody do their parts remotely?
Yeah, mostly because we had to. Wherever it was possible, I'd have the bass player and drummer work together, though. It was a very difficult time. The record came out of pure frustration. By October of 2020, I was losing it, you know? But out of everything, instead of going slightly mad with the restrictions, all this music started to come out of my head. I knew I had to do something with it.

I was mainly on my own, but there are a number of musicians that I can record with here in the south of France. My first instrument was the piano, and I still think of myself as a piano refugee. [*laughs*] I know how to make a piano track sound good. When I was first in America, I loved to play the drums, so I can set up a whole rhythm section on my own to lay down the tracks if I need to. I had been going so crazy, but playing music is one of the greatest experiences possible if you have intense emotional issues to process. I'd set up the tracks with everything on them, then send copies to musicians around the world — wonderful players — and they'd have a score and a demo to listen to, but they all had solos to play. My instructions were "Be yourself." I didn't care how crazy they went. I didn't care if they didn't want to follow what I'd laid down when I sent them the track to work on.

Did you miss the interactive process of working with the musicians face-to-face?
Here's an interesting thing: Sometimes the playing would be so great when they sent the track back to me that I'd be moved to redo my original part differently, simply because it was so inspirational. When I put the headphones on, it feels like I'm in

the room with the players. What was interesting then was that I'd send the track back to the musicians and they'd become re-inspired to change their part again as well, so it was a very collaborative process that wasn't at all hindered by working remotely. The mood and character of the pieces often changed and developed and required an evolving approach. This meant that things took a long time, of course, with all the sending of files and booking studio time, et cetera, for musicians around the world.

***Liberation Time* is a very strong album that covers a lot of ground, from straight jazz to fusion. Are you happy with the end result?**
The way the music came out was, to me, a kind of recapitulation of the wonderful '60s period of jazz with upright bass, in a way more straight-ahead but with electric guitar. It was kind of the classic jazz approach, but with my guitar today. It isn't that I set out to write an album like that; this is just how it came out. I wanted to keep the integrity of the music, but I recalled through the music the pieces that I recorded about 40 years ago, when my piano technique was reasonable. It's gone a lot since then. There are two piano pieces, and they are perhaps more in the late-'70s era of jazz. I thought that they were very personal, but why not? It makes me laugh when I think about making money from records. I guess maybe I should try another approach. [*laughs*] But I'm old-school. I don't even know how many albums I've made. For me, it is all about the music and the expression.

I presume, like most artists, you're primarily concerned with how happy you are with the music rather than commercial considerations.
Exactly. I can't stop making music and recording albums, whether they sell fantastically well or relatively poorly. Once the record is finished, it is unchangeable; it's over. People will either like it or they won't, but that's not my problem. [*laughs*]

"As the Spirit Sings" is a very upbeat opener. It's indicative of the album as a whole, which has a totally positive vibe. Was that something you were trying to convey?
In spite of the fact I was losing my mind, I'm a very positive person. I think to myself that I'm fortunate to be alive when I think of how many friends I've lost over the years. I'm very healthy and I can still play. I don't know how long it is going to last, but I don't care. I thought I'd lost it five years ago when I got terrible arthritis, but somehow I found a way to cure myself. I'm grateful for every day and every minute. Maybe that is the benefit of 50 years of meditation

Recording *Aura* with Miles Davis in Easy Sound Studio Copenhagen Denmark, January 1985

JAN PERSSON/GETTY IMAGES

— you become aware of the nature of existence and your place in it. I am in such awe of the immensity of this universe that we live in. I am in wonder and awe at the beauty of nature, and I feel connected to it. I think the reason that I am upbeat is that I feel connected to everything. The joy of playing music and the joy of existence is crucial to who I am.

How did you resolve the problem with your hands?
It was very bad in 2014, '15. I thought I'd come to the end of my playing life. I was quite philosophical about it. I thought, Okay, I've had a fantastic career, and thank you very much! I met several doctors, and one injected me with a solution of hyaluronic acid [*a cushioning and lubricating fluid found in the eyes and joints*], which was a fairly new concept, and it was quite effective, but the pain would keep coming back, and it bothered me to keep needing the treatment.

I then discovered a doctor in America called Joe Dispenza, who had a bad accident himself, and his back was broken in three places. He'd been told he'd need to live his life in a wheelchair. He started working on his own body with his mind, and I read about this and decided, three years ago, to try this approach. After six months, I realized that I didn't need the injections again. The technique is very simple: Every day before my morning meditation, I talk to my hands. I tell them how beautiful they are and how grateful I am for what they've given to me in my life and how much I love and cherish them. I do that every day, and I have no pain or swelling. Isn't that amazing? If you persevere, your mind will win.

"INSTEAD OF GOING SLIGHTLY MAD WITH THE RESTRICTIONS, ALL THIS MUSIC STARTED TO COME OUT OF MY HEAD"

Another interesting track is "Right Here, Right Now, Right On," which is a prime example of what you were saying about some of the tracks being a real throwback to an earlier age of jazz — the Blue Note small-combo approach. I guess that must be a very

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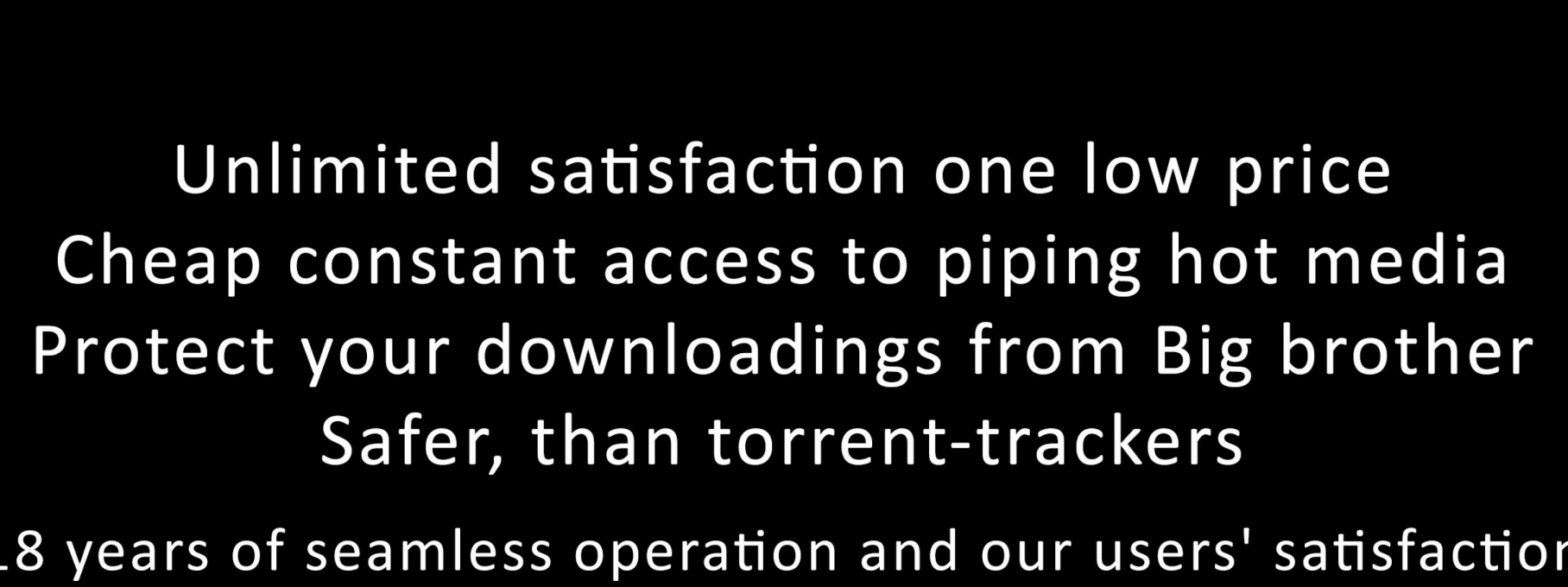

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Onstage at the London Jazz Festival, London, England, November 20, 2014

comfortable area for you to play in, having been playing that style of music since the early '60s.
All the tracks are in a comfortable zone for me because they all came out of my head. [*laughs*] I know them intimately, and they're like my babies. There is a strong post-bop feel on this one, as you suggest. To have these players on them is just wonderful. People like sax player Julian Siegel, [*drummer*] Vinnie Colaiuta and less well-known musicians like [*drummer*] Nicolas Viccaro. It is so satisfying to hear what they bring to the music. The musicians know that there will be ensemble playing and space for them to express themselves, and that is where the magic happens.

Among a wealth of great soloing from all concerned on the album, the bass solo on "Lockdown Blues" is a real highlight.
Absolutely. That is Etienne MBappé who plays in 4th Dimension, which is my current band. The other two members of the band, Gary Husband on piano and Ranjit Barot on drums, are the remaining musicians on that track.

"I'D SEND THE TRACK BACK TO THE MUSICIANS AND THEY'D BECOME RE-INSPIRED TO CHANGE THEIR PART AGAIN AS WELL"

On "Singing Our Secrets," it is almost four minutes before your guitar enters. It's clear that you see the music as an ensemble piece rather than a guitar-centric record, as so many guitarist's albums turn out to be.
I learned that lesson from Miles and Coltrane, you know. They are my heroes, and I still listen to them today. Take a track from Miles or Coltrane: They'll all take the melody, then perhaps McCoy will take a solo, or Herbie or Cannonball will take a solo, and Miles will come in later. The whole philosophy was marked on me and ingrained in my brain: Okay, I'm writing the music and I'm the so-called leader, giving the direction, but the whole point of collective playing is the fact that it is improvisation and interpretation, and this is individual and collective. I told everyone, "Be who you are. Be crazy if you want to be, but be crazy in the context of the music."

A track like "Liberation Time" is almost classic fusion and is very guitar heavy, whereas there are tracks like "Mila Repa" and "Shade of Blue" that are almost the polar opposite, featuring only your solo piano. Was the diversity of the album something that was planned or just part of the spontaneous creative process?
The only philosophy that I can hold to is to be who I am, and the devil take the rest. I've always felt that if I try to play something thinking people will like this, I'm not only betraying them but I'm betraying myself. Shakespeare said it 500 years ago: Be true to yourself and you'll be true to everybody else. [*laughs*] In music, it is so important.

I'm not against people who make records that are trying to please the crowd. It's just not for me. Over my career, I've had records that were very successful and some that were not so successful. It's important to distinguish between different kinds of success, There's commercial success and there is musical success, and it's not very often that the two come together. I think hell would be to make an album to please others and then think, Shit! Why did I do that? What an idiot I am! [*laughs*]

Gear-wise what did you use for the album?
Basically, I used a Paul Reed Smith that I've had for about 10 years now. I have a number of his guitars; he's a phenomenal guitar builder. I use a Line 6 HX preamp that I got that last year, and I really like it. At the same time, I sometimes use an old Mesa/Boogie preamp in the studio for a number of tunes. I only use preamps though. I haven't used a regular main amp for years, live or in the studio. When I play live, I'm fed into the desk and hear myself back through the monitors. I like to hear it in stereo, so I have my speakers in front and facing toward me. The house gets basically the same sound that I get. Strings are, as always, D'Addario. I guess I've used them for 50 years now, and for a pick I use a Dunlop Jazz 3. I think I was the inspiration behind this pick because I used to make something similar for myself and then slash and score them with a knife to help me keep a grip on them. The picks now have the grip built in.

In terms of your own playing, what do you work on?
I'm fascinated by harmony, melody and rhythm. They are all different departments of work, and there are

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A PORTRAIT *of the* ARTIST

In 2019, **Rick Laird**, the late bassist of Mahavishnu Orchestra recalled the making of *The Inner Mounting Flame*, and the agony he was in.

RICK LAIRD, BASSIST with the original Mahavishnu Orchestra, died in July 2021 from cancer, aged 80. In 2019, *Prog* magazine's Sid Smith spoke to him about his life and music. In this excerpt from an unpublished article, Laird discusses the early days of the John McLaughlin–fronted band and the recording of their incendiary debut album, *The Inner Mounting Flame*.

"I was in London in 1971 and I got a call from John," Laird said. "We knew each other from our time playing with Brian Auger in the '60s. He said he wanted me to come out and join a band he was forming. He sent me a couple of plane tickets for me and my wife, and off

"WE ONLY HAD TWO DAYS IN THE STUDIO, BUT THE FIRST ENGINEER QUIT BECAUSE HE COULDN'T HANDLE THE VOLUME"

I went. We rehearsed for probably two months, three or four days a week in New York. It was very challenging because it was all strange time signatures, very loud, very fast.

"We only had two days in the studio but the first engineer quit because he couldn't handle the volume we were playing at. That whole day was basically about getting a sound for Billy Cobham, who played a huge drum kit. We were also trying to get the sound right on John, who played with a stack of Marshall amps, and there was Jan Hammer with his keyboards also cranked up to 10. Honestly, I never really got comfortable with how loud we were, and I used to wear earplugs all the time. They found another engineer who came in around noon on the second day and

(from left) Rick Laird, Jan Hammer and John McLaughlin onstage in Amsterdam, 1973

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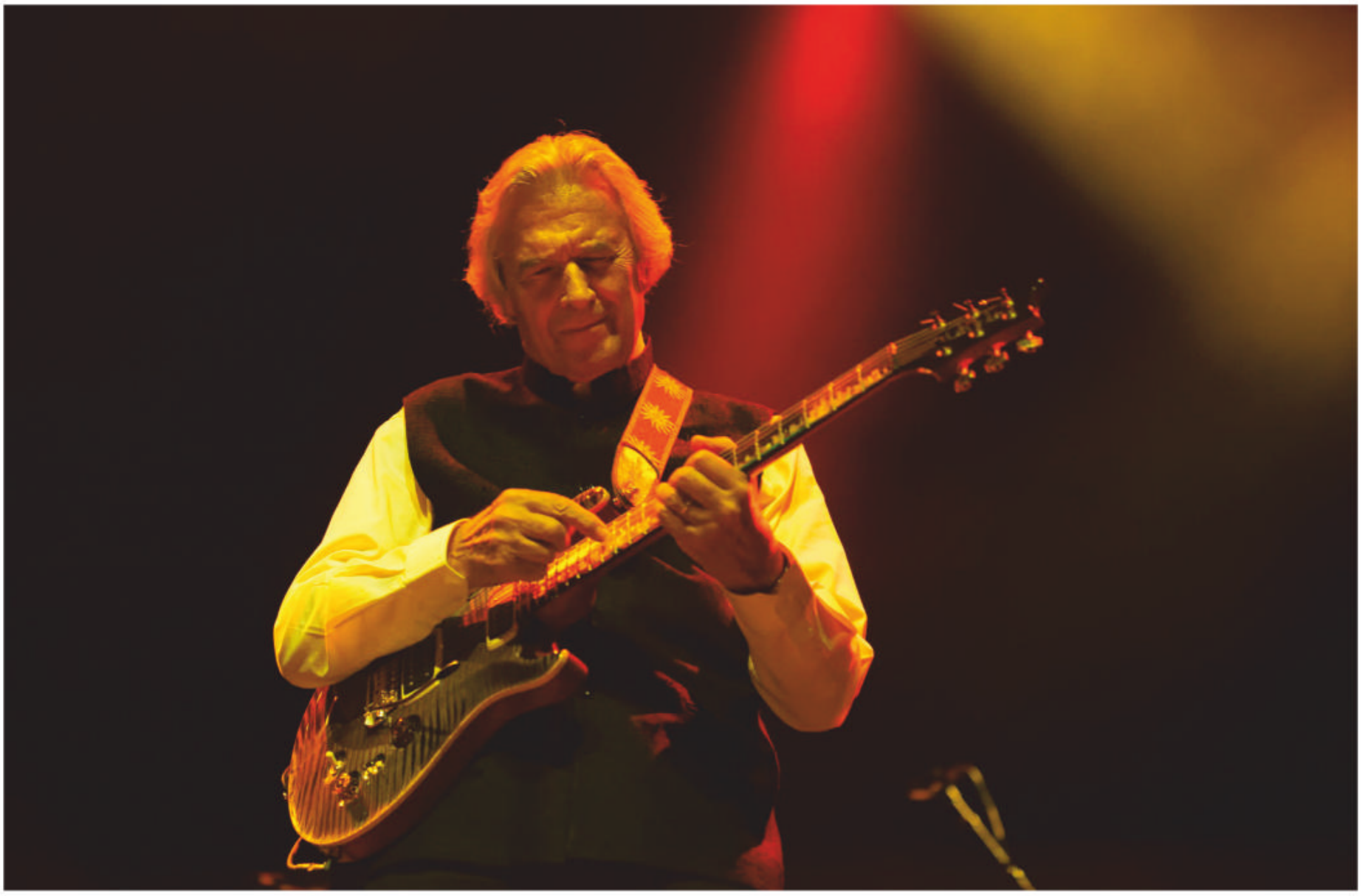
we recorded the entire album in about 12 hours. Pretty much all of it was one take for each song. It was very challenging to do it like that, but it was a legendary album nonetheless.

"The thing most people don't know is that the night before the first recording date, John drove me home to my flat in Queens, near where he lived, and when I got out of the car I accidentally slammed the door on the thumb of my left hand. It came up the size of a freaking football. My wife put ice on it and thought I should go to hospital. Of course, I showed up the next day in the studio and didn't tell anybody because we didn't have a budget to reschedule the sessions. So that first day, although I could just about move my hand and play, it hurt like hell. One of John's friends was in

the studio taking photographs of us all, and there's a photo of me that was used on the back of the LP cover where I'm gazing directly into the camera. When I look at that photo now, I see the portrait of a man in a lot of pain."



periods of life where I will pay more attention to each area. Articulation of melody is my focus at the moment. You can hear it in my playing on something like "Liberation Time."

The titles of my tunes are very meaningful to me. The idea of liberation was so important last year. To be free in music implies a lot of very important things: Firstly, that you don't have any technical problems with your ability to play your instrument. There is the harmonic aspect of improvisation — what are you going to say with your improvisation? All we can talk about when we improvise is our own life story: How deeply we feel and we what we feel about ourselves; how I feel about life, existence, the people I'm playing with, the music I'm playing. This is like the gas in the engine, the emotion behind the intent. Then you start playing.

"ADULTS DON'T HAVE PURE JOY SO EASILY, AND WE NEED JOY IN THIS WORLD. THERE'S FAR TOO MUCH HEAVINESS"

"Liberation Time" is just two chords. It's a total steal from "So What," by Miles Davis. Coltrane stole it for "Impressions," and Mike Brecker stole it for something else. We're all thieves! [*laughs*] You take the two chords, then decide what to do with them. To be free in music you have to have no problems technically, then you need to be inspired, and you can overcome the limitations of the music.

You then get into harmonic exploration. You need the knowledge to understand what you're trying to achieve and express. Any note is a good note if the intent is behind it. I like to be inspired by the musicians I'm playing with, to be provoked into trying something new and to take a chance, to walk the high wire and not be afraid to fall off. You only really get this freedom in jazz, in my opinion. Improvised music brings joy, and joy is not an emotion that you see in the world in general. I'm not talking about happiness, like, "Yeah you have a good job," et cetera. Joy is the immediate experience. I see it in my dog when I come home. You see it with kids who can't even talk yet. Adults don't have pure joy so easily, and we need joy in this world. There's far too much heaviness.

Are you still as excited by music as when you started, and what is it that keeps everything so fresh for you after all these years?

I'm alive. Every day is different, every minute, every hour. I've never lived this second before. Every second is new. It's amazing. In meditation, you practice living in the present moment, but the present moment is the most fantastic moment I'll ever have. I've never had it before. Every moment is a brand-new experience. Most of the time in life people look backward, but I look forward as every moment comes toward me. It's fantastic. I'm living in perfect stillness. Time is coming, and I feel it flowing over me, and I give thanks for being alive.

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Jake Shimabukuro with one of his custom Casey Kamaka tenor ukuleles

WITH *A* LOT OF HELP

Uke superstar **Jake Shimabukuro** teams up with Warren Haynes, Sonny Landreth, Willie Nelson, Jack Johnson, Vince Gill, Billy Strings and others on *Jake & Friends*.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIENNA MORALES

As the modern ukulele craze rages on, with major manufacturers offering more models than ever, its explosive origin can be traced back to a Hawaiian maestro who remains the instrument's most recognizable face and primary ambassador. Jake Shimabukuro has been the preeminent four-stringer on the planet since the millennium flip, and his luminous light has brought tons of attention to the ukulele, not only from aspiring four-stringers but also from oodles of six-stringers looking to rock some uke on the side. Heavenly artists from across the musical universe respect Shimabukuro, and an astronomical collection collaborated with him on *Jake & Friends* (Mascot).

Guitarists share a lot in common with ukulele players, but real collaborations between true stars from the two camps are few and far between. One might encounter an acoustic duo on occasion, but a uke and electric guitar combo is seldom seen, and during the course of the following conversation neither this editor nor Shimabukuro himself could readily cite a previous instance featuring a bottleneck slide player. *Jake & Friends* includes a pair of epic tracks featuring slide icons Sonny Landreth and Warren Haynes. "Sonny Days Ahead" is a

dynamic original composition where Landreth and Shimabukuro soar through a slew of twists and turns spanning more than eight minutes. The track with Haynes on guitar and vocals is a reworking of Alvin Lee's "On the Road to Freedom," and the interplay that develops throughout its expansive 13 minutes over a shuffling drum and bass groove is the kind of cosmic jam rarely achieved in a studio setting.

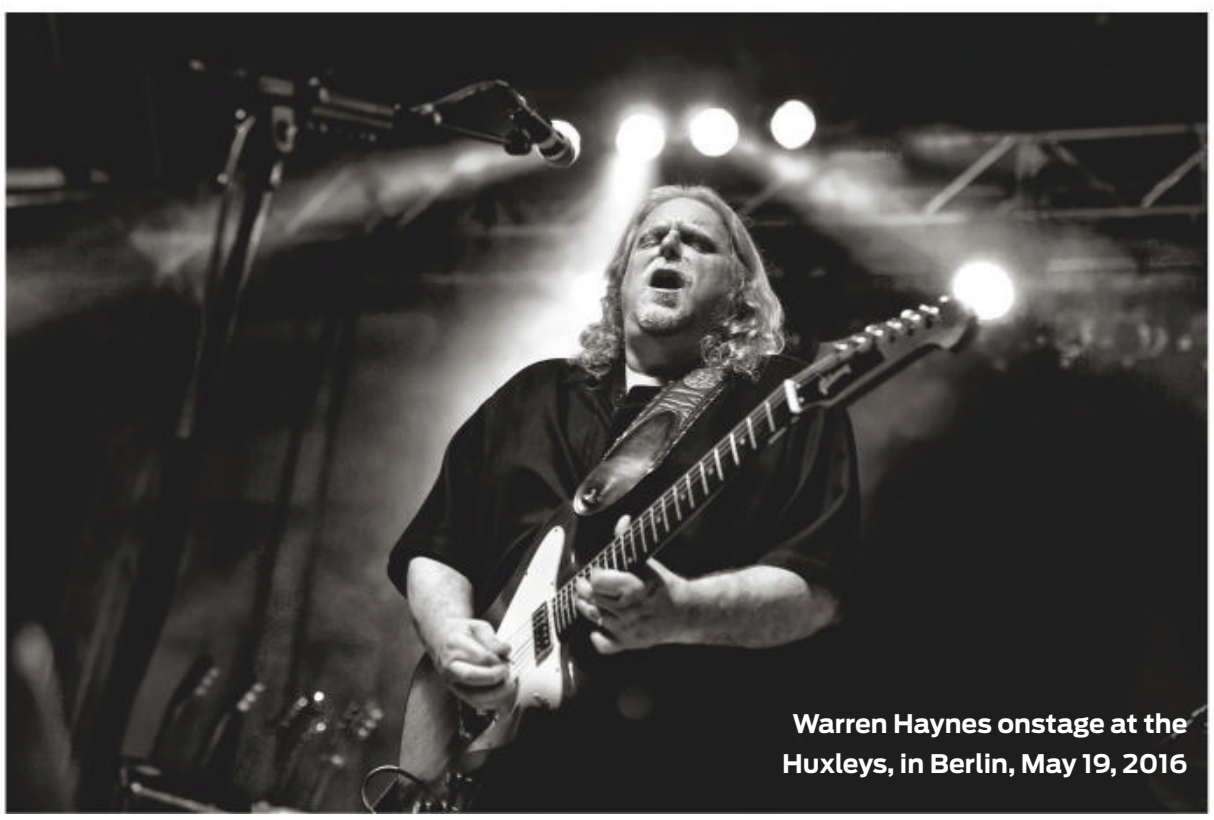
Shimabukuro's liquid lead chops and lush tone can sound so guitar-like that it's just wild to consider the source. Of course, the true source is his highly imaginative musical mind, and the way he melds with Billy Strings on "Smokin' Strings" is another treat in a totally different arena — or actually two. It's a beautiful melodic ballad for about four minutes before the duo jumps into hyperspace for a bluegrass aurora capable of lighting up any set of speakers it passes through. And Beatles fanatics will freak over three phenomenal covers featuring Vince Gill on "Something," Ziggy Marley on "All You Need Is Love" and Jon Anderson of Yes singing an otherworldly uke-and-vocal arrangement of "A Day in the Life."

How did you come up with such a cool collaborative album showcasing so many great guitarists?

Doing a collaborative album was an idea my manager mentioned, and it sounded great to me, but in the back of my head I thought, This is never going to actually happen. Luckily, Ray Benson from Asleep at the Wheel is an old friend who is also a great guitar player, and he agreed to co-produce with me. Ray said, "I would love to get Willie Nelson in the studio with you." A couple of months later we recorded "Stardust," and that was the catalyst. Ray took me to Willie's house on Maui the night before the session. I was super nervous and thanked Willie for the honor. He said, "So we're doing 'Stardust,' maybe we should run through it." Then there was an awkward silence before I realized that he meant right then and there standing in the middle of the living room. So I quickly took my ukulele out of the gig bag on my back. I was surprised again to realize that he wasn't going to play guitar. I did my best to play the chords and follow him as he sang. He asked me to add an instrumental interlude somewhere in the middle and said, "Sounds great, I'll see you tomorrow in the studio." We sat next to each other there and did it live twice. He sounded amazing, and I think the second take is on the record.

That was the coolest thing about doing this album. We recorded almost everything live in person. I overdubbed a few extra ukulele parts here and there, but otherwise it was all done live on the same ukulele that I had on tour: a Kamaka tuned standard, with D'Addario's EJ65T Pro-Arté Custom Extruded tenor set [*fourth to first strings, G, C, E, A*]. We'd schedule studio time wherever the artists were. Ironically, the one that lockdown forced us to do remotely should have been the easiest to do in person: Jimmy Buffet's "Come Monday." I recorded my part and sent it to Jimmy, and then he and Mac McAnally recorded their parts.

"WILLIE SAID, 'SO WE'RE DOING 'STARDUST,' MAYBE WE SHOULD RUN THROUGH IT.' HE MEANT RIGHT THEN AND THERE IN THE LIVING ROOM"



Warren Haynes onstage at the Huxleys, in Berlin, May 19, 2016

FRANK HOENSCH/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

How did you connect with Sonny Landreth?

I first met Sonny through Jimmy, actually. When I was on tour with the Coral Reefers, Sonny would often sit in with us, and we played together at Jazz Fest in New Orleans. It was Sonny's idea to write a song together, and we both

like to start by recording ideas into voice memos on our phones. He loved the one that became the opening riff for "Sonny Days Ahead." We wound up sending ideas back and forth, and when we got to the studio it was a matter of putting them all together, like a puzzle.

We tracked wearing headphones, with Sonny's amp in a separate room and me basically going direct into the preamp, so there's no room video with the full audio, but I wish people could see everything he's doing, because the sounds he creates on that guitar are unbelievable! I can usually figure out a player's sound by watching fingers and considering pedals, but not Sonny. I found myself sitting there across from him, watching his hands and shaking my head. His phrasing, tone; everything is absolute perfection. He was getting all sorts of tremolo-like, vibey, pulsating effects without using any pedals. You can hear it at the end of the track. I have a way to emulate a subtle whammy effect by rolling my right forearm over and pressing down on the soundboard, which moves the bridge up and down. So I'm physically smashing the instrument in a way. But he wasn't even touching the guitar.

Was he waving his right hand over the pickups?

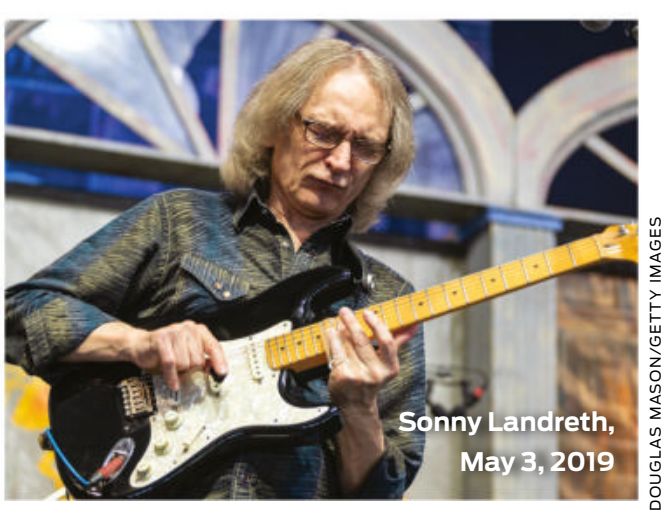
Yes, exactly. He manipulates the magnetic field somehow. It's like magic. I'm a huge fan, especially of his live recordings, because it's unbelievable that he can create such a huge sound with just a trio. I never thought I'd get to hear the sound of the ukulele along with Sonny Landreth's guitar. It was so humbling.

That was a big deal for me. So was the incredible sound of Jon Anderson's voice with the ukulele, and of course, being able to trade leads with Warren Haynes.

What was it like to first hear him conjure that swampy psychedelic vibe with the slide at the opening of the track?

After we'd messed around for a while, we decided to go for a full take. We looked at each other, and then Warren closed his eyes. When he played that riff, all the hairs on my arm stood up. [*laughs*] The situation with Sonny was more structured, because we were composing together, whereas with Warren the feeling was so free because we were doing a cover of "On the Road to Freedom," and we knew we were going to play out and do a fade at the end of the recording. The problem was that we didn't have a time limit. We kept going for it, and we wound up playing for, like, 15 minutes. Listening back, we didn't feel like cutting anything out. The feeling was so inspired and present in the moment. I don't usually get that in the studio.

Warren is such an incredible improviser. If I caught on to a little theme I heard him play, he'd react right away. If I was quick enough to respond, he'd react to my reaction and throw something right back at me. In the beginning, you can tell that I'm learning how to feed off of that. It's like having a conversation, and I'm nervous because the conversation is with Warren Haynes. At first you can tell that I'm waiting for him to finish, and then I'll think of a response. But after about the first eight minutes, the relationship develops. I begin to feel comfortable and supported, and I get into a rhythm with him. By the end, I feel comfortable enough to play at the same time. We're not stepping on each other; we're creating this



Sonny Landreth, May 3, 2019

DOUGLAS MASON/GETTY IMAGES

Billy Strings onstage, August 28, 2021

experience together. The thing I love most about that track is the way you can hear how the relationship changes from the beginning to the end.

How about "Smokin' Strings," another heroic guitar duo with Billy Strings?
The thing I love most is that's a first take, and we didn't know it was even being recorded. They were still setting up cameras in the studio. We knew we were going to write something together, and the first half, the ballad part, stems from a little idea I had. So we played through it, figuring out where to trade solos over the different sections. But I told him that, at some point, we've got to go into a jam, because everybody wants to hear you do your thing and shred, including me.

So we went for it off the cuff, smiling and playing without overthinking it, the way I tend to do when the recording light goes on, and at one point we looked at each other. I went into a new rhythm, and he took off. When we were done, we agreed that was great and started trying to map out what we had just done so we could do it again. We tried a couple of times, but neither had the same energy or playfulness. That's when someone in the booth said, "Why don't you guys come in here and listen to the first one?" We were so grateful they had captured it. The coolest thing is that was the first time Billy and I had actually sat down and played together.

What's the video on YouTube where he shows you a double-thumbing technique at the end?
That's actually the second take. He was trying to show me claw-hammer technique, but it's hard for me to get a good tone on the upstroke of the thumb. It's also hard to get the fluidity and the feel of that rhythm right. I'm going to keep working on it. I'll get it one of these days.

Do you play guitar?
No, not really. I know a couple of chords and I can strum something very basic if I have to, but that's about it. I don't have the touch or the feel. I can get a decent tone on a nylon-string because the attack is similar to a ukulele, but I can't get a nice tone on steel strings. I think it's a lot easier for a guitar player to jump onto the ukulele than the other way around because there are more strings, and the feel of steel is a totally different touch.

Shimabukuro at Bomhard Theater, Louisville, Kentucky, November 9, 2018

What are you most excited about playing right now?
My new ukulele. I play Kamaka tenor ukuleles, usually made of all koa, with a mahogany neck, and Casey Kamaka makes me a new one every three to five years. Then I'll use that for everything, on tour and in the studio. The nice thing about the instruments I've been playing recently is the collaboration with Pearl Works. They do all of the inlays. A couple of months ago when I was on tour, a beautiful instrument was gifted to me. It's the result of a collaboration between Kamaka Ukulele, Pearl Works and Hearne Hardwoods. They put an incredible instrument together. It's so gorgeous, and the sound is amazing. I haven't been able to record or tour with it yet, but I can't wait for people to see this ukulele, because it's absolutely stunning. They actually made two of them. The other one is displayed at the Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix, Arizona. Every time I get a new ukulele, I retire the old one. The one I played on *Jake & Friends* is now at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio. I can't wait to start playing the new one on the road.

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Oz Noy performing at North Sea Jazz Festival, in Rotterdam, Netherlands, July 14, 2018

MINOR-KEY MAGIC

An insightful look at Oz Noy's harmonically inventive solo from his instrumental version of the Zombies' classic "She's Not There."

BY MIKE SWICKIS

AS ONE OF today's most innovative and creative jazz fusion guitarists, Israeli-born Oz Noy has developed an exciting playing style by blending the sophistication of jazz with the raw energy of rock, blues and funk. In this lesson, we'll look at Oz's solo in his instrumental cover of the mid-'60s classic "She's Not There" by the Zombies. This funky and evocative arrangement appears on his 2020 release *Snapdragon* and showcases his creative and highly appealing jazz fusion-style soloing on a simple pop chord progression. The solo is played in the key of A minor, and while the majority of it is blues based, there are plenty of harmonically inventive twists and turns along the way.

The transcription presented herein spans the entire solo, which is 32 bars long and begins at 2:38 on the recording. The chord progression over which Noy solos is based on the verse and pre-chorus sections from the original Zombies version of the song and follows a repeating 16-bar form, or "chorus," that consists of an eight-bar "A" section followed by an eight-bar "B" section. It's a good idea to take a look at the chords above the staff and familiarize yourself with the entire progression before digging into the solo, as this will help you get a handle on the overall form and better appreciate Noy's harmonic-melodic thinking.

Oz begins the solo with some bluesy phrases based on the A minor pentatonic

The Zombies in 1964

scale (A, C, D, E, G) and played over a i-IV A Dorian vamp (Am to D). He starts out simply and peppers his lines with some sassy string bends, creating an alluring vibe. In bar 4 the guitarist plays an unexpected F natural note over a D chord, which implies a D minor sound

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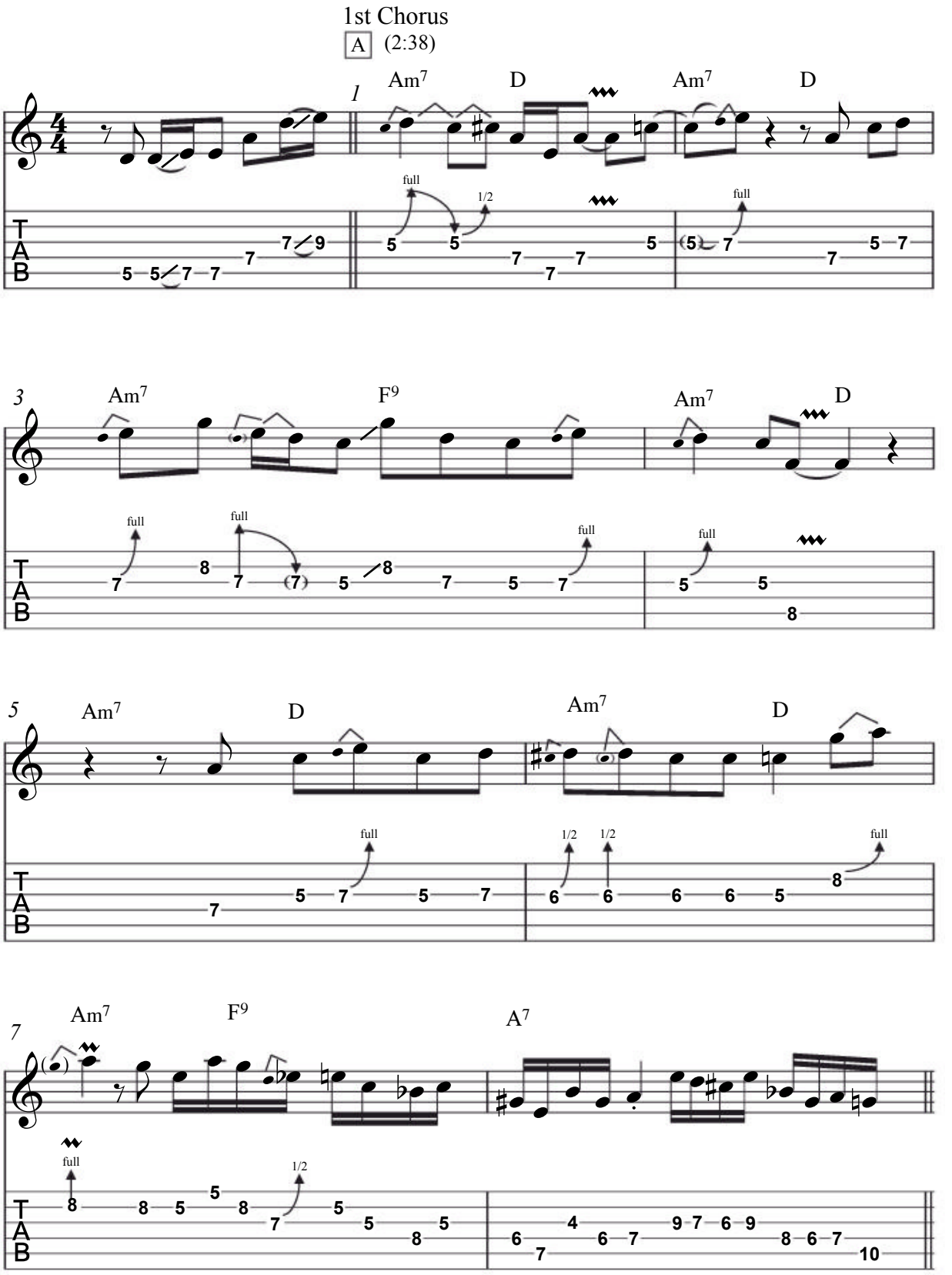
(D, F, A) over the D major tonality (D, F♯, A). A simple explanation for this is that he's adding an F note from the parallel A Aeolian mode (A, B, C, D, E, F, G) to create melodic tension. In fact, throughout the solo we'll encounter additional examples of Oz's use of different A minor scales and see how he combines them to create a kind of A minor "gumbo."

Another device that will come up often in this solo involves Noy's superimposition of scale or arpeggio tones that imply either a major or dominant 7th sound over a minor chord with the same root. For example, take a look at bar 6, where he plays a C♯ note over Am. The C♯ describes an A major sound (A, C♯, E), which is the V (five) chord of the D chord that follows. In so doing, he implies the sound of a V - I cadence — A to D instead of Am to D.

OZ USES DIFFERENT A MINOR SCALES AND COMBINES THEM TO CREATE A KIND OF A MINOR "GUMBO"

While this move seems to break an important musical "rule" — namely, Thou shalt not play a major 3rd over a minor chord — it builds exciting harmonic tension when used in this way.

As we approach the end of the first "A" section, take a look at bar 7, beat 4, where Oz plays a line that implies an altered-dominant E7♯5♭5 sound, which carries over to the first beat of bar 8. You may be wondering why the implied E7 altered tonality works over the F9 chord in the progression. The answer is mainly due to the fact that both chords serve to build harmonic tension that resolves satisfyingly on the A7 chord. The E7 altered-dominant line is therefore justified by the fact that it implies a V - I cadence to A7. In fact, by carrying the E7 sound over the bar line into bar 8, Oz creates even more tension with a delayed resolution to A7. It's all about building that extra drama!

She's Not There (solo) Oz Noy

In bar 8, Oz plays a cool jazz lick over the A7 chord using notes from the eight-tone A bebop-dominant scale (A, B, C♯, D, E, F♯, G, G♯) with an added ♭9, B♭. The dominant sound of the scale and the added ♭9 combine to create a compelling cadence to the D major chord in bar 9, resulting in a smooth transition to the first "B" section of the progression.

Noy begins this next section of his solo by playing an interesting angular motif that he develops over the chord changes D - Dm - Am. Notice how the line jumps back and forth between high and low registers, creating two separate melodic paths and evoking a "call-and-response" phrasing structure. The lower part of the line begins with an F♯ note, which is the 3rd of the D major chord,

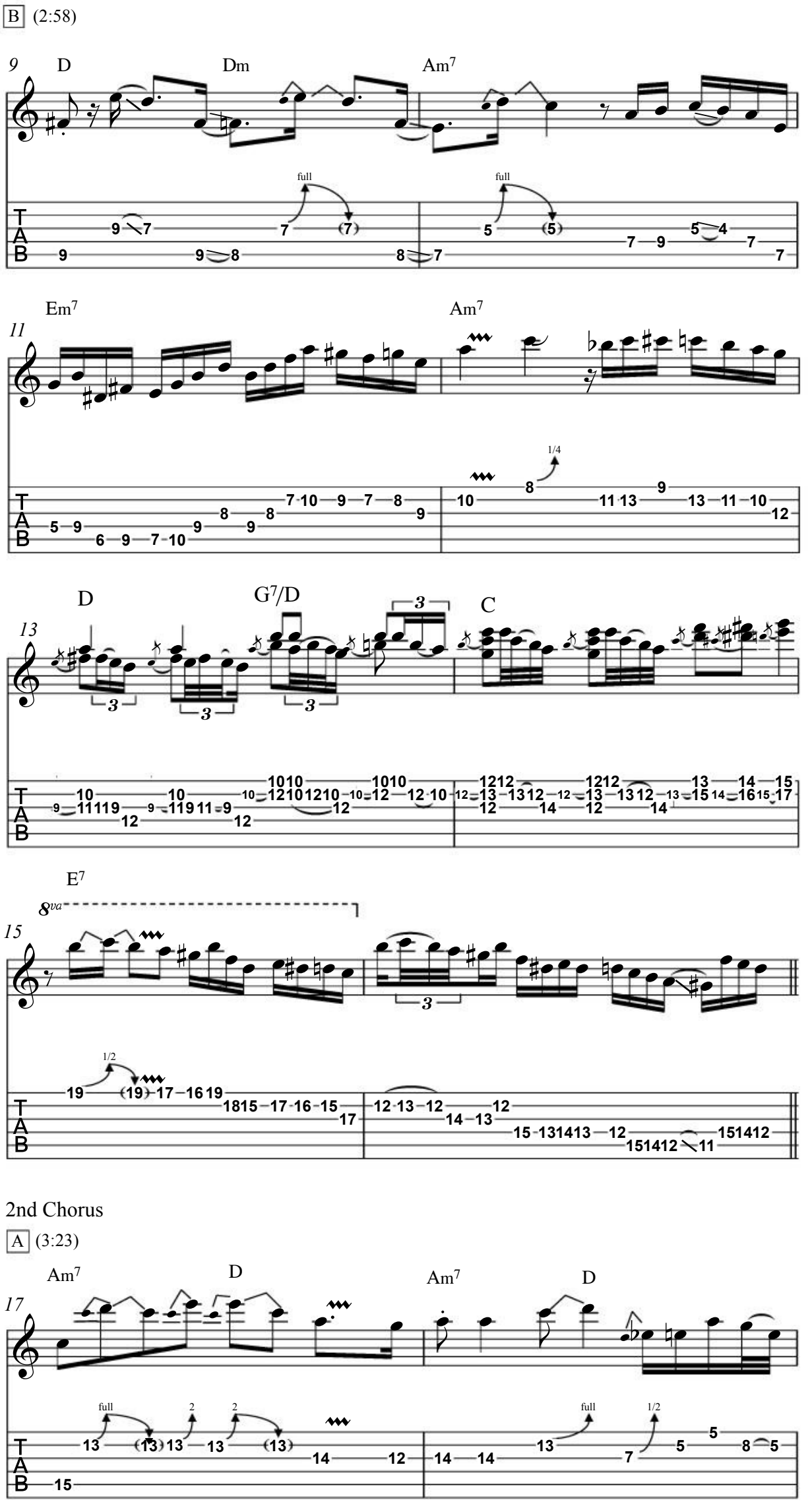
PETER VAN BREUKELEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (NOY); STANLEY BIELECKI/ASP/GETTY IMAGES (ZOMBIES)

and moves to F, which is the minor, or "flat," 3rd (♭3) of Dm, before landing on E, the 5th of Am. The higher part of the line moves from E, the 9th of both the D major and D minor chords, to the D root note, then down to C, the ♭3 of Am.

The lick at bar 11 is played over an Em chord and illustrates Oz's use of the E harmonic minor scale (E, F♯, G, A, B, C, D♯), which encompasses the chords and arpeggios for D♯ diminished (D♯dim: D♯, F♯, A) and B7 (B, D♯, F♯, A). Notice how the guitarist weaves both of these arpeggios into his melodic line, creating tension and an interesting contour. After outlining the B7 arpeggio on beat 3 of bar 11, Noy plays a chromatic line that includes both the major and minor 3rds of E — G♯ and G, respectively. This effectively describes the sound of an E7♯9 chord (E, G♯, B, D, G) and is another example of superimposing a dominant 7-type sound over a minor chord in order to create a strong V - I cadence to the chord that follows. In bar 12, we see another example of this approach, this time with an A7♭9♯9 sound, which Oz imposes over the Am chord. The ♭9 and ♯9 extensions (B♭ and C, respectively) decorate the A7 chord tones (A, C♯ and G), resulting in an A altered-dominant sound that creates a strong push to the D chord that follows in bar 13.

Next, let's check out Oz's tasteful and soulful-sounding use of double-stops with oblique hammer-ons and pull-offs, in bars 13 and 14. This is a cool "rhythm-lead" technique popularized by players such as Jimi Hendrix on songs like "Little Wing" and "Castles Made of Sand." Noy begins with a double-stop phrase that elegantly embellishes a D major chord followed by similar phrases that likewise outline the chords G and C. He concludes the lick with an ascending sequence of double-stops that leads chromatically to the E7 chord in bar 15.

In the final two bars of his first solo chorus (bars 15 and 16), Oz crafts a cascading single-note line using notes from the E Phrygian-dominant mode (E, F, G♯, A, B, C, D), with an added D♯ passing tone that he uses, along with F, to melodically bookend the targeted E



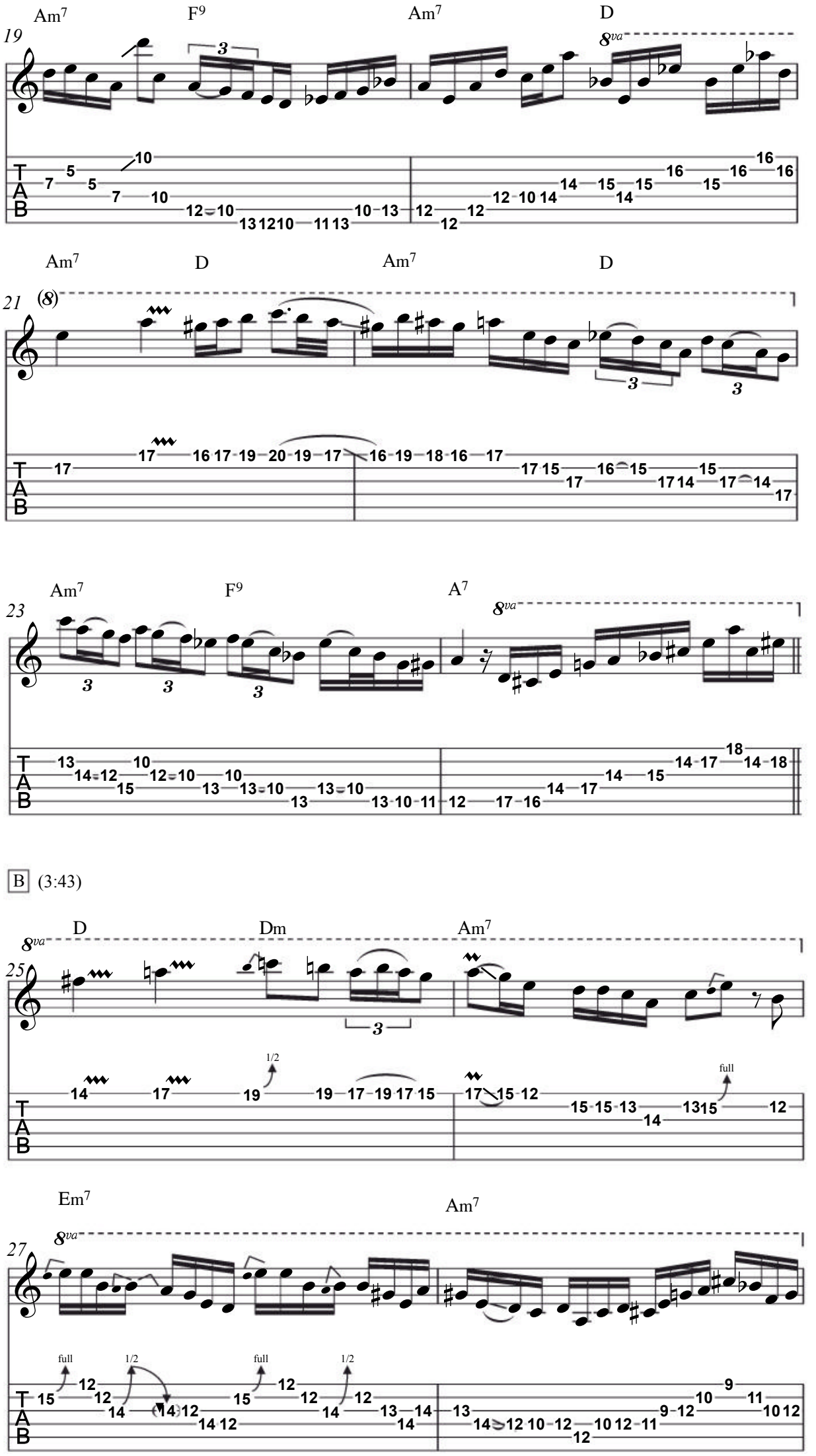
root note. Notice how the F note imparts a ♭9 sound to the backing E7 chord and that the D♯ also creates descending chromatic movement between the E root and the ♭7 (D), similar to what we would see in an E bebop scale.

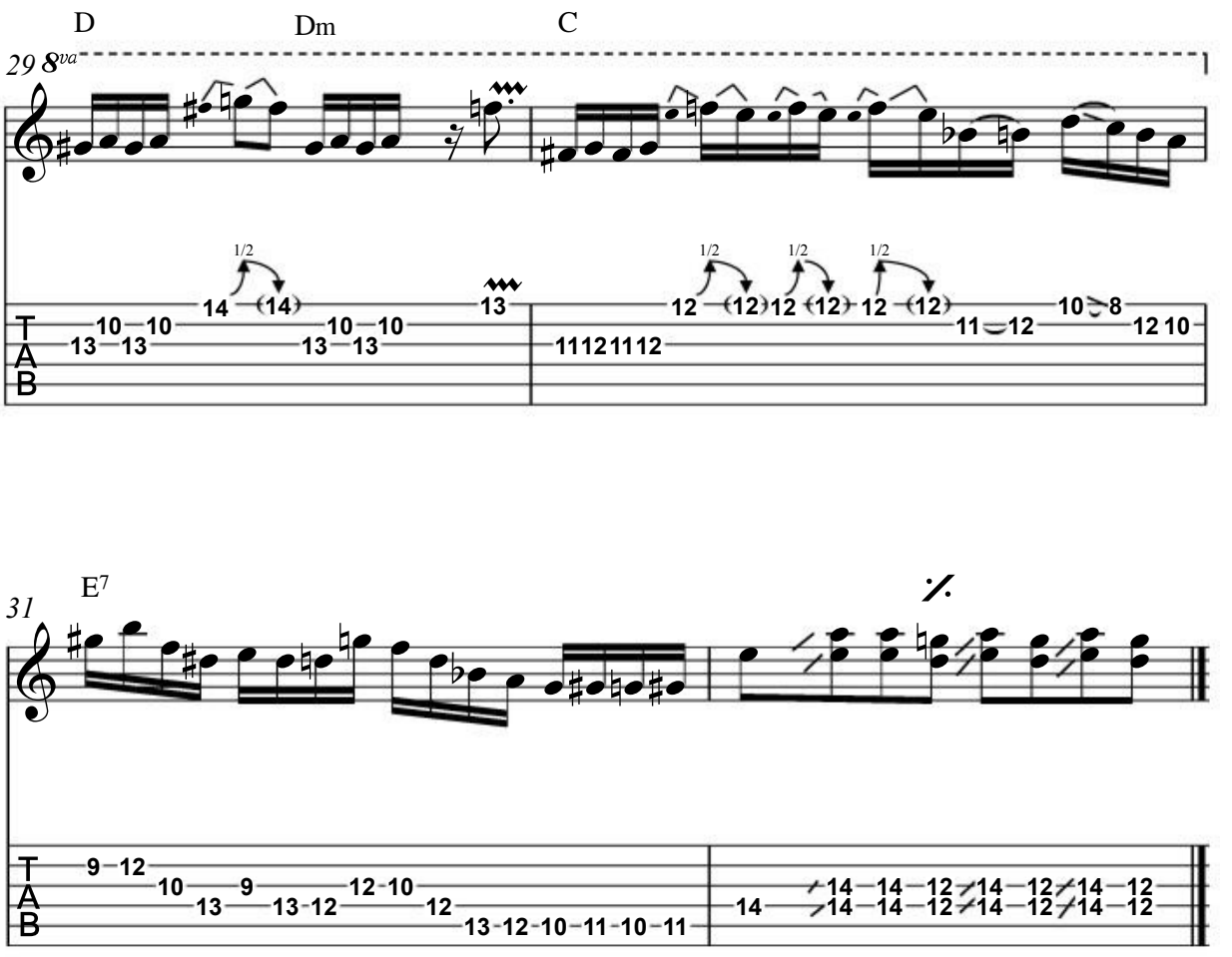
Noy begins his second solo chorus (at bar 17) in the same manner as the first — with some cool A minor pentatonic and blues scale-type ideas. Notice his expressive use of the extra-wide string bends that span two whole steps, from C to E. Things get jazzy when we get to the F9 chord in the second half of bar 19, with a lick based on the F bebop-dominant scale (F, G, A, B♭, C, D, E♭, E). Notice that this scale is identical to the F

HE CREATES MORE TENSION WITH A DELAYED RESOLUTION TO A7. IT'S ALL ABOUT BUILDING THAT EXTRA DRAMA

Mixolydian mode (F, G, A, B♭, C, D, E♭) but there is an additional E natural chromatic passing tone between E♭ and F, which creates a ♭7 - 7 - root motion.

In bar 20, Oz constructs an interesting motif based on an arpeggio in a seven-note sequence. The first seven notes outline an A minor arpeggio with an added 11th (D), and in the second half of the bar the guitarist plays a similar seven-note sequence but up an octave and a half step. The notes B♭, E, E♭ and A♭ in beats 3 and 4 are all native to the B♭ blues scale (B♭, D♭, E♭, E, F, A♭), which means we have momentarily shifted up a semitone, or half step, from our home tonality of A. This kind of *chromatic shift* — where an idea is first played in the home key then followed by a similar idea played up or down a half step — is sometimes referred to as "sidestepping," and it offers a simple and musically intriguing way to play "outside" lines. Sidestepping tends to work best when both the "outside" and "inside" phrases share a similar rhythm, much like what we see here in bar 20.





Noy introduces another shade of A minor in bars 21 and 22, with a line based on the A harmonic minor scale (A, B, C, D, E, F, G♯). Like the A blues scale (A, C, D, E♭, E, G) and A Dorian mode (A, B, C, D, E, F♯, G), this note set serves as yet another musical ingredient in our previously mentioned A minor "gumbo."

Observe how the A♯ (B♭) passing tone creates some interesting chromaticism on the first beat of bar 22. Here, Oz approaches the A on beat 2 by first playing a note a half step above followed by a note a half step below. This is an example of a melodic device known as *enclosure*, which is a common technique used in bebop music, where "chromatic neighbor" pitches surround and precede a targeted note.

In bars 22 and 23, Oz introduces a motif that consists of a repeating triplet rhythm paired with a descending A minor pentatonic-based sequence. Check out the rhythmic and melodic similarities on each beat in the overall phrase. I recommend experimenting with creating patterns like this on your own, by picking a repeating rhythm and scale sequence to create long ascending or descending lines.

In bar 24, Oz approaches the end of the second "A" section with a line that implies an A7♭9 sound on the A7 chord via the use of the A half-whole diminished scale (A, B♭, C, C♯, D♯[E♭], E, F♯, G). The tension created from the half-whole diminished lick resolves to F♯ on the D major chord at the start of bar 25. Since the note F♯ is the 3rd of the D chord and lands on the bar's first beat, it helps to create a solid resolution and a clear transition into the final "B" section.

Noy addresses the Am and Em chords in bars 26 and 27 with their respective minor pentatonic scales. By playing A minor pentatonic over Am and E minor pentatonic on the Em chord, he creates a feeling of continuity by outlining the vertical harmony on each chord.

At the end of bar 27, notice Oz's use of the G♯ note, which suggests an E major sound over the Em chord in the progression. This is similar to what we saw in bar 6, where the guitarist implied a V - I cadence with a major V chord instead of a minor one. Notice here that he hits the G♯ note again on the downbeat of bar 28, this time implying a natural 7 on the A minor chord, resulting in an Am-maj7 sound (A, C, E, G♯). Oz gets fancy again in the second half of this bar, where he slips in an A7♭9♯5 arpeggio, which functions as the V7 of the D chord in the next bar. Once again, he's implied a dominant sound on a minor chord to create a stronger V - I cadence to the chord that follows.

Using *common tones* between chords is a great way to create smooth, cohesive lines in your solos. Oz demonstrates the use of this device in bar 29 over the D and Dm chords with two three-note sequences that share the notes A and G♯(A♭). The first sequence moves from G♯ to A to F♯ on the D chord and follows with G♯ - A - F on Dm. The G♯(A♭) note functions as the ♯11 on the D chord and ♭5 on Dm, and the A note is the 5th of both chords.

As we near the end of the solo, we encounter another example of Oz's application of one of the bebop scales. Have a look at the second half of bar 30, where the guitarist plays notes from the C bebop-dominant scale (C, D, E, F, G, A, B♭, B) over the C chord to create a line that tastefully resolves to the E7 chord in bar 31. Notice how he employs the scale's B passing tone to create chromaticism within the line.

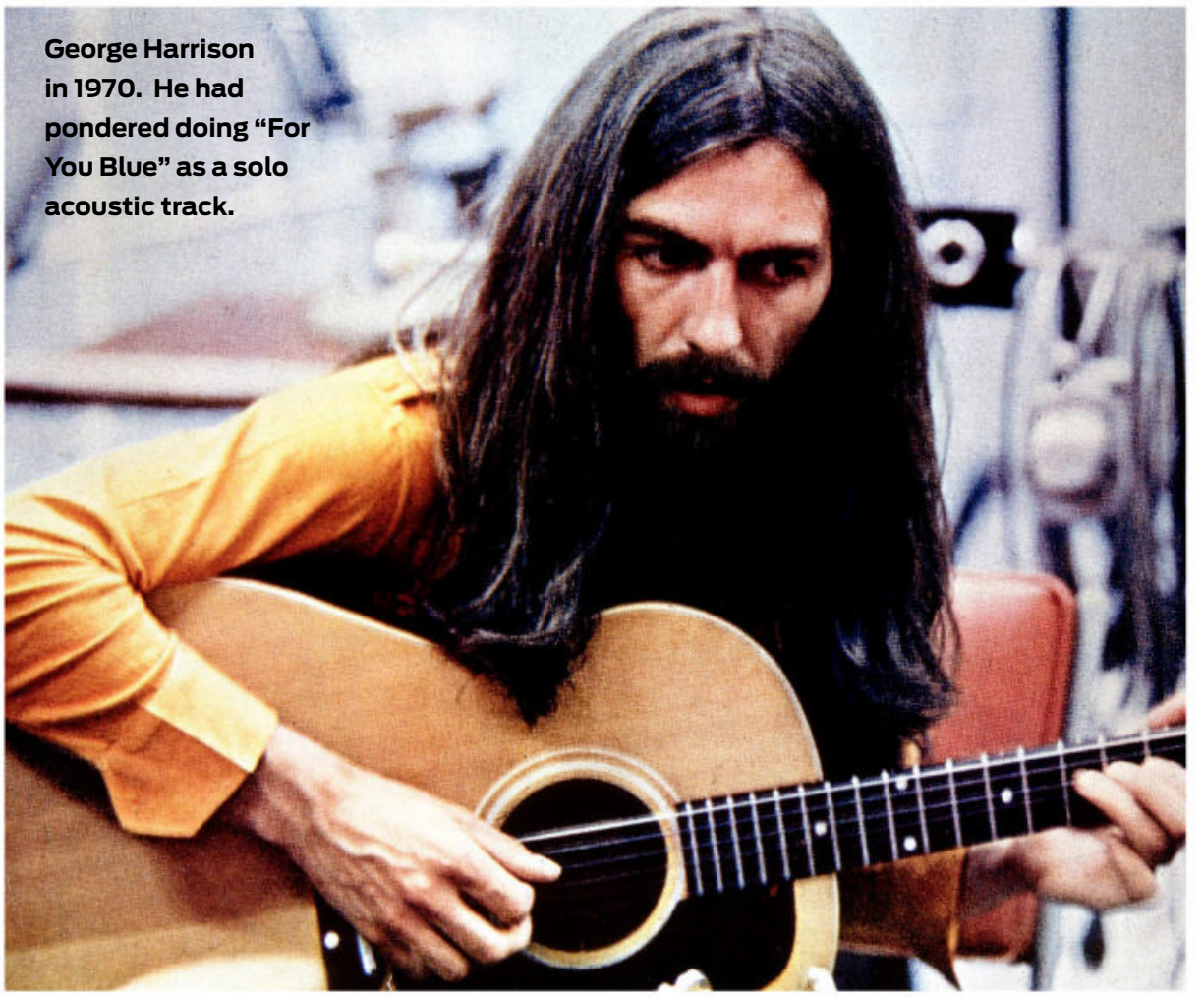
As the solo comes to a close, Noy plays a cool lick in the second-to-last bar that combines notes from the E half-whole diminished scale (E, F, G, G♯, B♭, B, C♯, D) with the chromatic passing tones D♯ and A. The additional passing tones present another example of the melodic enclosure technique, this time by chromatically surrounding the root note, E, and major 3rd, G♯. Oz concludes with a sliding-4ths double-stop lick borrowed from the melody, making for a smooth transition out of the solo.

When studying this solo, I highly recommend recording the chords or using a looper, in order to play and hear the single-note lines in their harmonic context. As always, have a listen to the recording, and, while you're at it, check out the entire *Snapdragon* album for more imaginative and inspired guitar playing and writing.

Get It How You Can

Acoustic insights from *The Beatles: Get Back*.

BY JIMMY LESLIE



George Harrison in 1970. He had pondered doing "For You Blue" as a solo acoustic track.

GAB ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

LIKE OTHER PLAYERS from across the musical universe, I've been engrossed in director Peter Jackson's epic documentary culled from the sessions that yielded the Beatles' *Let It Be*. Revelations abound, though they are fewer on the acoustic side, as the group's original goal was to create a live rock and roll show. That wound up being the infamous rooftop concert at Apple Corps headquarters in London. The mass of material created during the sessions can be divided into two camps: the electric rooftop rockers, and the softer melodic goodness that didn't fit squarely into that box. There are a lot of lessons to be learned from the film, but perhaps most interesting is how the album's unplugged tunes came to be.

WE CAN WORK IT OUT... OR CAN WE?

The main takeaway may be that, occasionally, things don't work out the way you planned. Sometimes you can find a song on acoustic guitar that you simply can't find on an electric. The revelation revolves around multiple attempts at "Two of Us," starting on day one of rehearsals at Twickenham Film Studios, with McCartney on acoustic while Lennon and Harrison play electrics. Paul switches to bass for the next go around when he and Harrison get into the infamous row that led a frustrated George to quip, "Whatever you want me to play, I'll play it. Or I won't play at all." In the next clip, Lennon and McCartney are rocking out, standing up to share a single vocal mic and having a ball, while Harrison sits on a Fender amp playing his Les Paul. Yet another stab at "Two of Us" winds up sounding akin to the song "Get Back." But Lennon can't stop fooking around on his Epiphone Casino, McCartney scolds him, and Harrison not only gives up on the tune — he quits the Beatles right then and there. He's literally "on his way home."

TWO, THREE OR FOUR OF US?

The acoustic epiphany finally occurs after Harrison rejoins the band at Apple Studios and they give "Two of Us" another chance. They hit another dead end in the electric format, this time with John tossing out different vocal approaches, until he realizes, "Maybe just softer." He quickly tunes up Harrison's Gibson J-200. Paul picks up his Martin D-28 — a right-handed model strung lefty — while explaining that he doesn't feel quite right playing bass on this one anyway, "because it was written on guitar." John strums a cowboy G chord with a straight eighth-note feel and declares, "That's it!" McCartney plays the intro with nice vibrato, smiles, and they're off, with Paul essentially playing the lead role on his Martin, and Harrison copping a bass-like line on his mahogany Telecaster. They cut a take and Harrison proclaims, "It sounds lovely, that, now. After all that anguish we went through with it. Put it on the B-side." They finally get it.

FOR YOU BLUE, OR MAYBE JUST ME?

Harrison first introduces his brand-new skiffle blues "For You Blue" on his J-200 at Twickenham. "Maybe it's an acoustic song for me," he remarks. "It's great because I don't need any backing, really." He wants to do his own thing so badly, but the Beatles end up delivering a playful arrangement when they move to Apple, with Lennon slip-sliding away on a Hofner 5140 Hawaiian Standard lap-steel he barres with what appears to be a lighter, as McCartney plays a piano whose strings are threaded with paper to create an old-timey tack-piano sound. Harrison leads them on acoustic with a capo at the sixth fret, and it remains an anchor in the recording.

NOTHING'S GOING TO CHANGE... OR IS IT?

The other acoustic gem on *Let It Be* that doesn't quite "come together" in the *Get Back* documentary is "Across the Universe." It's a simple song with an epic saga of deep development that dates from February 1968 through attempts at a band arrangement during these rehearsal sessions, and then beyond the breakup of the Beatles as the track receives different production treatments. We'll delve into that, and what guitar players can learn from the tune itself, in next month's column.

EASTMAN

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

T64/v and T184MX

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

BOASTING A REPUTATION that grows year upon year, the Eastman String Company has long defied any "budget-brand" preconceptions normally heaped upon Chinese-made guitars, delivering instruments that punch well above their weight for build quality, tone and playability (see the "Meet Your Maker" interview with two of the company's prime movers on page 24).

Suffice it to say the guitars reviewed this month, a T64/v and T184MX, prove a couple of great cases in point. Each displays how this maker eschews the copy-and-clone approach, taking inspiration from classic forms while thoughtfully seeking to improve the designs in the process. Both instruments were tested through a Deluxe Reverb and a Friedman Mini Dirty Shirley combo, with JHS Bonsai and Tsakalis Six overdrives for dirt.

T64/V

The T64/v we looked at is primarily a new model by virtue of its color, a stunning cherry red done in the hand-rubbed and characterfully aged Antique Varnish that has become one of Eastman's signature moves. The enigmatic model name defines a 1964-style, ES-330-inspired thinline hollowbody, with a genuine Bigsby vibrato tailpiece (a non-vibrato version is also available). As such, this one has a fully hollow 16-inch-wide body made from Eastman's own deluxe maple laminate, with a glued-in maple neck and ebony fretboard cut to the traditional 24 ¾–inch scale length. In addition to the slight variations in materials represented there, and the subtle alteration of the body and headstock profiles, other significant changes have been wrought upon the mid-'60s Gibson formula.

"WE SOLVED THE PROBLEMS OF CREATING A FULLY HOLLOW THINLINE THAT WAS A PLEASURE TO PLAY, AND AT THE SAME TIME HAS THAT UNIQUE SOUND OF A HOLLOW GUITAR WITH THE GROWL OF P-90S"

"I came up with this guitar because of my many frustrations with traditional thinline hollowbody electrics," says Pepijn 't Hart, Eastman's international sales and product development manager. "It took me forever to finally get a good one, a 1963, and it had a Bigsby. Suddenly it made sense: The rattling was gone because the string angle behind the bridge was much steeper than with a trapeze tailpiece."

Another of 't Hart's frustrations with the classic design was that switching between bridge and neck pickups generally required a total readjustment of amp settings. Enter Jason Lollar and a custom set of dog-ear P-90s, plus some adjusted positioning courtesy of Eastman master luthier Otto D'Ambrosio, moving the pickups a little closer together on the body.

"The result is that you can use this guitar in all three pickup positions without revoicing the amp," 't Hart says. "So we solved the problems of creating a fully hollow thinline that was a pleasure to play, and at the same time has that unique sound of a hollow guitar with the growl of P-90s."

In addition to the red varnish finish that looks luscious right out of the case, upgraded cosmetics are represented by

multi-ply top and back binding with ivoroid outer layer, ivoroid fretboard binding, pearl parallelogram block inlays and bound f-holes. To complement the yesteryear look, the hardware displays a subtle patina, including an artfully distressed Bigsby done by Eastman's master hardware ager Huang Xiaoping, who worked from detailed photos of the original Bigsby on 't Hart's 1963 Casino.

Whether it's the thin varnish finish or the woods and construction — and probably some combination of all three — the guitar is extremely lively and resonant when played unplugged, with an impressive acoustic volume for its depth. The neck sports a comfortably rounded carve inspired by late-'50s Gibson profiles and feels great in the hand, even at a hair wider than traditional at 1 ¾–inches across the nut, with playability further aided by 22 very well-dressed medium-jumbo frets.

As with the ES-330 and Casino themselves, it's easy to look at the T64/v and think "it's an ES-335 with P-90s," but there are other notable differences in the design. In addition to the fully hollow body, the neck

joint hits at the 16th fret rather than near the end of the fingerboard, which in turn shifts everything else — pickups, bridge, tailpiece — further into the meat of the lower bout, and likewise shifts your playing position. This brings the left hand closer to the body, which is likely very comfortable to most players. At the same time, it pushes the right hand and shoulder further out to the right if you want to pick down near the bridge, which could be less comfortable for some.

The T64/v's resonant and balanced acoustic performance translates to a tasty plugged-in tone, and one that's surprisingly versatile. The Lollar P-90s deliver the requisite throaty snarl from each position but are also impressively clear and crisp when you want them to be. As might be expected, given Grant Green's early excursions on a not-dissimilar design, putting the neck pickup through a clean amp with the tone rolled down a hair delivers a delicious jazz tone that's never wooly or boomy. Flick the switch and step on a pedal, and it all translates to rock and roll with a vengeance.

The T64/v easily pushes an edge-of-breakup tube amp into the crunch zone, yielding good dynamics in the process, and takes well to overdrive pedals too. Feedback can always be an issue with fully hollow thinlines, and the T64/v will howl if you're not careful about your proximity to a loud amp, especially with some gain from a pedal or lead channel. But it's far less out of control than most such guitars I've played, and admirably resistant for the most part. All in all, it's an inspiring guitar, well-conceived and impressively well made, and earns an Editors' Pick Award for its achievements.

SPECIFICATIONS

T64/v

CONTACT eastmanguitars.com
PRICE $1,939 street

NUT Bone, 1 ¾" wide
NECK Maple, Traditional Even "C" profile
FRETBOARD Ebony, 24.75" scale, 12" radius
FRETS 22 medium-jumbo
TUNERS Gotoh Relic Series SD90
BODY Thinline hollowbody made from deluxe maple laminate
BRIDGE Gotoh Relic Series GE104B Tune-o-Matic with Bigsby B7 vibrato tailpiece
PICKUPS Two Lollar dogear P-90s
CONTROLS Two volume, two tone, three-way selector switch
FACTORY STRINGS D'Addario NYXL .011-.049
WEIGHT 6.9 lbs
BUILT China

KUDOS A clever reimagining of the thinline hollowbody electric. Very well made, excellent playability and surprisingly versatile tones
CONCERNS Playing position might take slight readjustment for some

T184MX

Considering Eastman got its start building quality carved-top violins and cellos, the T184MX is right out of the company's wheelhouse. Following the popular format of guitars based on a reduction of the traditional ES-335 body size, it's a variation on a model the company has offered almost since its introduction of electrics.

Despite its looks, this one is built in the tradition of fine acoustic archtops, though in a thinline body that's hollow but for a mahogany block beneath the bridge and tailpiece, the presence of which allows for the use of the body-mounted Tune-o-matic and stopbar. The arched top is carved from solid flamed maple, with back and sides of solid mahogany, and there's natural flamed-maple binding, with multi-ply black/white/black/white purfling, on the body front and back, and the f-holes. It's all dressed in an

immaculate high-gloss Gold Burst finish in thin nitrocellulose lacquer.

The neck is carved from solid mahogany, with an ebony fretboard adorned with small pearl dots and multi-ply binding — with a flamed-maple outer layer again — which extends up and around the headstock. This model has a 25-inch scale length, with neck dimensions similar to the T64/v, including a 1 ¾–inch width at the nut and a "C" profile inspired by late-'50s Gibson neck shapes. Although they're the same in the specs, this neck feels just a hair thinner than that of the T64/v, but all Eastman necks are carved by hand, so there will be some slight variation between them.

For pickups, 't Hart and D'Ambrosio selected a pair of U.K.-made Bare Knuckle Old Guard custom humbuckers, wired through a traditional four-knob control section with three-way switch. This all comes together in what is simply a gorgeous instrument, one that plays beautifully and expresses a confidence-inspiring quality of sound even unplugged. In all honesty, I even donned my readers in my search for minute issues up and down this guitar, and couldn't find anything worth noting. Does a little sawdust shaken out through the f-holes count? The neck might be a hair wide for some hands at 1 ¾ inches, but that's a design choice rather than a flaw, and it's very comfortable regardless.

Through the test rigs, the T184MX elicited the contemporary jazz tones that its designers were aiming for in the neck position, delivering a classy performance with what, to my ears, was an optimal marriage of warmth, clarity and harmonic bloom. 't Hart commented that, because of the solid woods "this model is, of course, less versatile than the laminate ones, but it's got such a smooth thick jazz tone, and it still can rock with the best." That presents one matter on which we disagree: I found this guitar extremely versatile, and while it doesn't replicate the laminated-construction tones of a traditional ES-335, it subs more easily for a Les Paul once you kick up the gain and really does rock like a demon when you want it to.

From lively jangle in the middle position to meaty twang from the bridge pickup to the aforementioned richness in the neck — it's all there, and without a hint of mud. There's an impressive blend of elegance and potential aggression in the T184MX, making it a wide-ranging and expressive performer, and another Editors' Pick Award winner.

We've been impressed by Eastman's guitars for several years now, and the company's work continues to improve. It makes sense that a team of craftspeople aided by thoughtful designers, all of whom strive to do more exemplary work, day after day, would turn out continually better guitars.

It's difficult to imagine a buyer of similar new guitars from a boutique manufacturer being disappointed to open the cases and lift out these two beauties. Chalk one up for positive U.S.-China relations, and check out these Eastman models if you get the chance.

SPECIFICATIONS

T184MX

PRICE $2,229 street
NUT Bone, 1 ¾" wide

NECK Mahogany, Traditional Even "C" profile
FRETBOARD Ebony, 25" scale, 12" radius
FRETS 22 medium-jumbo
TUNERS Gotoh SD90
BODY Thinline hollowbody made from deluxe maple laminate
BRIDGE Gotoh Tune-o-Matic and stopbar tailpiece
PICKUPS Two Bare Knuckle BC Old Guard custom humbuckers
CONTROLS Two volume, two tone, three-way selector switch
FACTORY STRINGS D'Addario NYXL .010-.046
WEIGHT 6.7 lbs
BUILT China

KUDOS An elegant take on the carved-solid-wood archtop thinline, yielding everything from rich jazz tones to aggressive rock
CONCERNS The neck dimensions might feel a hair wide to smaller hands, but so it is for many Eastman models

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TAYLOR

American Dream AD27e Flametop

TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

"THE LEAST TAYLOR-SOUNDING guitar you've heard to date," is how Taylor presented the AD27e Flametop to *GP* before sending a review unit and connecting us with designer Andy Powers for a thorough explanation of his latest creation. Needless to say we were intrigued.

So what exactly is this new outlier? The AD27e Flametop joins the American Dream team, which Powers describes as "the cup of black coffee of guitars. 'Just get the job done.'" The worker-bee line was introduced at the height of Covid's first wave, in the summer of 2020 via the original AD27e, which featured a Grand Pacific body made of solid sapele back and sides with a mahogany top.

SPECIFICATIONS

AD27e Flametop
CONTACT taylorguitars.com
PRICE $2,199 street

NUT Black Tusq, 1.75" wide
NECK Tropical mahogany
FRETBOARD Eucalyptus, 25.5" scale
FRETS 20 medium
TUNERS Taylor nickel
BODY Solid maple sides, back and top. 20" long, 16" wide 4 5/8" deep. V-Class bracing
BRIDGE Eucalyptus with Micarta saddle
EXTRAS Taylor AeroCase included
ELECTRONICS Taylor ES2 with volume, bass, and treble controls
FACTORY STRINGS D'Addario Nickel Bronze Light .012-.53 (non-coated)
WEIGHT 4.4 lbs (as tested)
BUILT USA

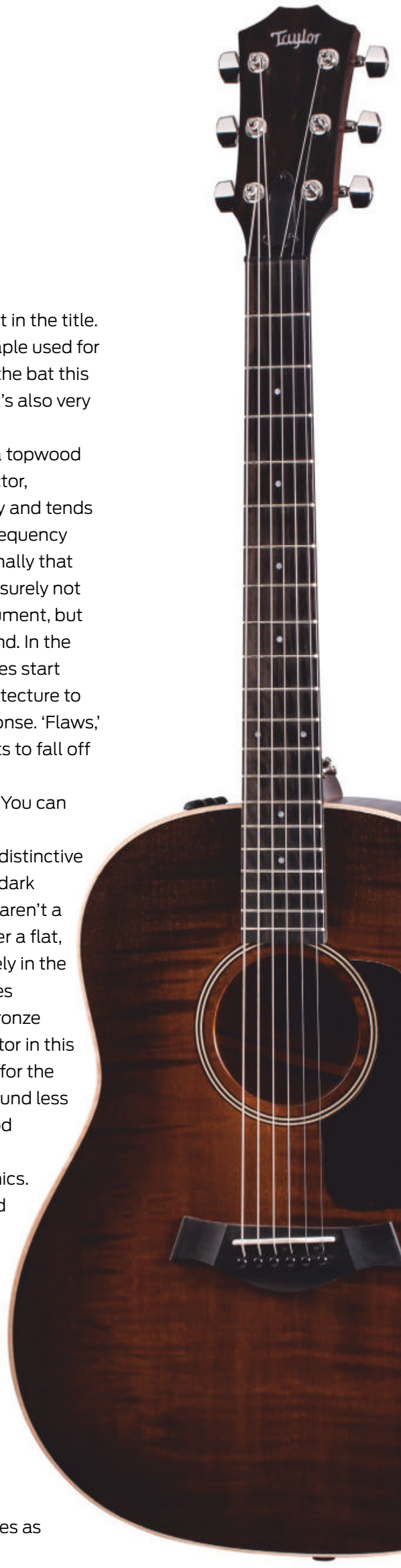
KUDOS Hearty, earthy tone with harnessed highs. Smokey smooth look and feel. A well-crafted workhorse that can take a wallop
CONCERNS Musicians should understand this model is designed with a less-vibrant, more lo-fi tone and duller string action, and is aimed at traditionally non-Taylor players

The primary difference here is right in the title. "Flametop" refers to the flame maple used for the top, back and sides. Right off the bat this isn't only unlike any other Taylor, it's also very unusual for an acoustic guitar.

"Maple isn't typically used as a topwood because it has a high damping factor, meaning it responds kind of slowly and tends to sluff off some of the delicate frequency response," Powers explains. "Normally that kills the guitar, and a maple top is surely not the choice for a high-fidelity instrument, but in this case I'm after a dustier sound. In the context of V-Class bracing, the rules start changing. You can adapt the architecture to allow a very different kind of response. 'Flaws,' such as where the intonation starts to fall off and the resonance becomes too unpredictable, can be re-thought. You can turn a hindrance into a help."

The Flametop definitely has a distinctive sound. The tone is dry and on the dark side, especially for a Taylor. There aren't a lot of complex overtones but rather a flat, fundamental tone focused squarely in the middle range. The Flametop comes equipped with D'Addario Nickel Bronze strings, which are a significant factor in this earthy-sounding equation. Fitting for the Flametop, they are designed to sound less brilliantly metallic, letting the wood speak for itself. The guitar is also equipped with Taylor ES2 electronics. To my ears, the Flametop sounded a tad lighter and more airy when amplified. I simply rolled the treble back a bit on the guitar.

Somehow, the AD27e Flametop makes you play differently. The neck profile is pretty much modern standard stuff, so it doesn't seem to be coming from there, although it's worth mentioning that the neck is made of eco-friendly farmed eucalyptus, which Powers describes as



TAYLOR NOMENCLATURE

"*AD* signifies the American Dream Series. The *2* indicates a hardwood top, which in this case is maple, as opposed to a softwood top such as spruce, which would be designated by a *1*. The last digit, *7*, signifies the Grand Pacific body shape, and the *e* means *electronics*. Finally, *Flametop* means that this model has a flame-maple top." ***— Andy Powers***

"more akin to rosewood than ebony." The Nickel Bronze strings are surely another factor. They feel and sound worn-in, even when they're brand-new, and I feel like they slow me down on the neck. But there's more to it than that: It's the maple top's response that just makes you want to bang away! The Flametop begs to be strummed aggressively with a thick pick, cowboy-style. It's a no-frills, broken-in and practically road-worn tone that lends authenticity to blues. When I mentioned the Flametop feeling like some new version of a pawnshop prize, Powers replied, "That's it," and ran with another analogy.

"I like driving an old pickup truck, so I got a Ford from the '50s, and it's fun to drive around, but it's also a handful," he says. "You immediately want to put in disc brakes, power steering and a smoother transmission. Many guitars I could seek out to create a sound similar to the Flametop are not reliable or comfortable to play. They have poor action, intonation and a host of other issues. I wanted to create a sound that I can't find in any other new guitar, along with modern performance and reliability. So while the AD27e Flametop has that pawnshop dreadnought appeal, it's also got modern tuners, an accurate fretboard with excellent action and awesome intonation. The sonority of the sound, well, that's a different flavor, and I kind of like it."

Powers' point is well taken, and it played out over time. The more familiar I became with the Flametop, the more the whole concept came into focus. The weathered look of its shaded edgeburst Woodsmoke finish and satin sheen perfectly matches the dusky, gritty tone. Powers had already taken the Taylor sound into new territory with the original Grand Pacific, the first Taylor designed to deliver a warmer sound via a classic, soft-shouldered-dreadnought body style reminiscent of a Gibson J-45 miked-up in a Nashville studio. But that's still a high-fidelity instrument made for discerning players. Then came the more workman-like version in the form of the original American Dream, the AD27e, with its more fundamental tone. The Flametop takes another giant step away from traditional Taylor turf, venturing further to a place that's downright funky and down home on the back porch. For a second opinion, I ran it past a pair of trusted ears belonging to the owner of the local recording studio. He's a good-ol' southern boy who typically eschews Taylor guitars on account of them being "too bright." He took one solid strum of the Flametop and proclaimed, "That's my favorite Taylor ever."

THE POWER OF MAPLE

"Maple is one of the great hopes of instrument building because it's both very traditional and very modern. Going back centuries, every good violin that's ever been made was maple and spruce. I've used maple a lot on electric guitars because its mechanical characteristics are appropriate for the design, and it's a great topwood for archtop guitars." ***— Andy Powers***

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

STRYMON

Iridium Amp and IR Cab Pedal

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

GIVEN THE COMPANY'S success in the effects pedal market, it might have come as a surprise when Strymon announced its entry into amp modeling and IR cabs with the Iridium. Then again, the California pedal maker's know-how with premium DSP could be as easily applied to the virtual backline as to the complex reverb, delay and modulation pedals with which it's made its name, and which the folks at Strymon clearly hope you'll partner up with this handy, compact, fly-rig-capable pedal.

SPECIFICATIONS

Iridium Amp and IR Cab Pedal
CONTACT strymon.net
PRICE $399 street

CONTROLS Drive, bass, middle, treble, room, level. Toggle for Amp round/chime/punch and Cab a/b/c. Foot switches for on/off and Fav. Back-panel switch for mono/stereo/sum.
CONNECTIVITY In (stereo-capable via TRS), Out L, Out R, Exp/MIDI, USB, 1/8" stereo headphone output, 9VDC power input
EXTRAS Pre-loaded with nine hi-res stereo cab IRs (three per amp type) and will take third-party loading via Strymon Impulse Manager software; compatible with Strymon MultiSwitch Plus for selecting four presets; MIDI control capable (enabling 300 presets)
SIZE 4" x 4.5" x 1.75" (excluding feet and knobs)
BUILT Assembled in USA

KUDOS Three good-sounding amp emulations lay the foundation for a truly impressive bundle of functionality in a very compact package
CONCERNS Some users might miss XLR outs and/or an FX loop, although these would likely require a bigger and pricier package

To fit such an impressive feature set in this compact pedal enclosure, Strymon made several of the tone-shaping decisions for you. Only three amp choices are included, but they're classics: Round, modeled on the Fender Deluxe Reverb; Chime, based on the Brilliant channel of a Vox AC30 Top Boost; and Punch, based on a Marshall "Plexi" Super Lead. Each amp shares the same controls for drive, bass, middle, treble and level, plus a room control that dials in reverb of three selectable sizes (not intended to replace outboard reverbs). However, with this model, the EQ responds like the tone stack of its respective amp. As such, the middle does its thing in traditional fashion on the Plexi model, but it becomes a bonus control on the originally mid-less Deluxe Reverb, and an output-stage treble-cut control on the AC30.

As per most things Strymon, many of the controls on the simple interface do double or triple duty. Cab bypass, amp bypass and input level are accessible via the drive control. The level control also accesses level trim, power-up modes and five options for expression connection modes. Meanwhile, the room knob taps small, medium and large room options, all of which is selected and saved by pressing and holding a combination of foot switches.

Strymon's main intention with the Iridium is pedalboard integration. While you can generate some old-school lead tones from each amp model when desired, Iridium isn't focused on providing channel-switching-like clean/crunch/lead options (although it's somewhat achievable by means of the user preset Fav switch, via the four presets accessible with a Strymon MultiSwitch, or through the 300 presets available with full MIDI implementation). Rather, consider your pre-Iridium drive pedals the gain shapers, as so many guitarists do these days anyway, and the Iridium itself the box that injects realistic amp tone into the chain.

To that end, the pedal carries no onboard effects — other than the eponymous room control — but that is once again in keeping with its intention. Your wet atmospherics of choice should all function perfectly well chained up after Iridium, while traditional pre-amplifier modulation pedals can even be run into the unit in stereo thanks to the TRS input's dual mono/stereo capabilities.

The aforementioned amp models are achieved in familiarly impressive Strymon fashion using in-house Matrix Modeling and powered by a high-performance 32-bit floating-point SHARC ADSP processor, while a hybrid IR/algorithmic processor delivers the

studio-reverb-like room sound. The cab sims are delivered by the hi-res 24-bit/96kHz/500ms stereo IRs, which equates to unusually powerful stuff in a box this size. Three IRs are available per amp, factory loaded to deliver a Deluxe Reverb 1x12, Blues Junior 1x12 and Vibrolux 2x10 for the Round model; an AC30 2x12 Alnico by popular third-party IR producer OwnHammer, 1x12 Alnico by Celestion, and Mesa 4x12 by Valhiller for Chime; and a GNR 4x12 by OwnHammer, 1x12 Vintage 30 by Celestion, and 8x12 Marshall by CabIR for Punch.

And that's only the beginning. Strymon includes a broad selection of alternative IRs for use with the pedal, and you can load in any compatible third-party IRs or those you make yourself using Strymon's Impulse Manager Software via the USB connection. Although there's little space here to fully describe its massive capabilities, that Impulse Manager software is an enormous tone-tweaking tool, and using it simply to EQ each IR to suit your sound and playing style can make a tremendous difference to the results.

Some may wish the Iridium had a pair of XLR outs, but that would force a bypass of any post-Iridium reverbs and delays, unless a stereo loop was also added, all of which would necessitate a larger enclosure. No doubt Strymon weighed the options and decided to strike a happy medium.

I tested Iridium with a variety of electric guitars, with pedals before and after the unit (as appropriate), into studio monitors, headphones (which also eliminates any post-Iridium effects) and a Tech 21 Power Engine Deuce Deluxe for traditional backline use. Overall, I found an awful lot to like about this small box of wonders. First and foremost, the three amp models sounded enjoyably realistic, proving an excellent foundation for anything that the majority of pedal-centric rigs is likely to need to create. Touch sensitivity and the segue from clean to clipping works well in all three, though perhaps a little more smoothly in the Chime and Punch models, which is how you'd find these amps in real life. The Round model sounds "like" a Deluxe Reverb, although to my ears perhaps more an average Deluxe Reverb reissue than an exemplary vintage combo. That works for thousands of guitarists every weekend anyway, and it provides plenty of familiar voices and a usable clean template.

The Iridium felt and sounded great into the Tech 21 (a powered 1x12 semi-FRFR cab) for traditional back-line-style "in the room" playing. As with so many of the more advanced modelers these days, it really shone through the studio monitors and headphones, where its rendition of a studio-processed amplifier made total sonic sense. As such, it consistently delivered tones that were fully ready to be laid down in the DAW, or pumped to the FOH system for an uncompromised live experience.

While none of the three amp models is intended to offer contemporary high-gain performance, Punch in particular will get close with drive dimed and level adjusted to taste, but again, that's where your pedals come in. Overdrive applied to the front end by a Wampler Tumnus Plus, an Ibanez TS9 and a JHS Angry Charlie yielded the same results I'd expect from genuine tube amps of these types, and again showed how seamlessly a compact rig like this can come together. Room proved useful and realistic, and the Iridium integrated well with post-output reverbs and delays. Finally, I found the nine factory cab IRs all toneful and worthwhile, and also had no trouble loading in a few personal favorites, with great results.

Despite its size and simple control interface, this box will do a lot more than can be fully covered in this space. Yet its cornerstone sounds and easy functionality are themselves enough to warrant an enthusiastic reception on the market, and an Editors' Pick Award.

FENDER

Mustang Micro

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

TESTED BY MICHAEL ROSS

MINIATURIZATION IS THE story of the modern age, as devices keep getting smaller and more powerful. Case in point, the Mustang Micro, a very, very small guitar amplifier and effect modeling system that features a selection of tones from the Mustang series modeling amps. You can plug it directly into your guitar's input jack, connect stereo headphones to its 1/8-inch jack, choose various amp and effect settings, and play for hours. The unit lets you jam along with tunes from your music library or streaming service through Bluetooth audio from your mobile device, tablet or computer. You can also record your guitar tones with or without a Bluetooth audio stream to your preferred recording system by using Mustang Micro's USB-C output.

This tiny device offers 12 amp models with a range of clean and dirty tones, 12 effect combinations with some parameter control, adjustable EQ, and a relatively large master-volume wheel that adjusts instrument and overall output level to headphones or earbuds. You get approximately four hours of continuous play time supplied by a lithium-ion battery that is recharged via USB.

SPECIFICATIONS

Mustang Micro
CONTACT fender.com
PRICE $119

CONTROLS Master volume, selector switches for amp, effects, EQ, and parameter modification
EXTRAS USB-C connector, headphone input, Bluetooth receiver
SIZE 1.5" x 1.13" x 3.15"
BUILT China

KUDOS Amp-like playing experience in an incredibly compact size. Versatile applications
CONCERNS None

Connecting the Mustang Micro was easy enough. Simply insert it into your guitar's output with the cleverly designed, 270-degree rotating input plug that allows the device to fit neatly with a variety of guitars and, as we shall see, pedals. I could chose an amp, effect, parameter and EQ setting by pushing the plus and minus sides of the small buttons on the side. This proved quick enough once I memorized the settings and their associated colors as listed in the manual (or you could just keep the instructions handy).

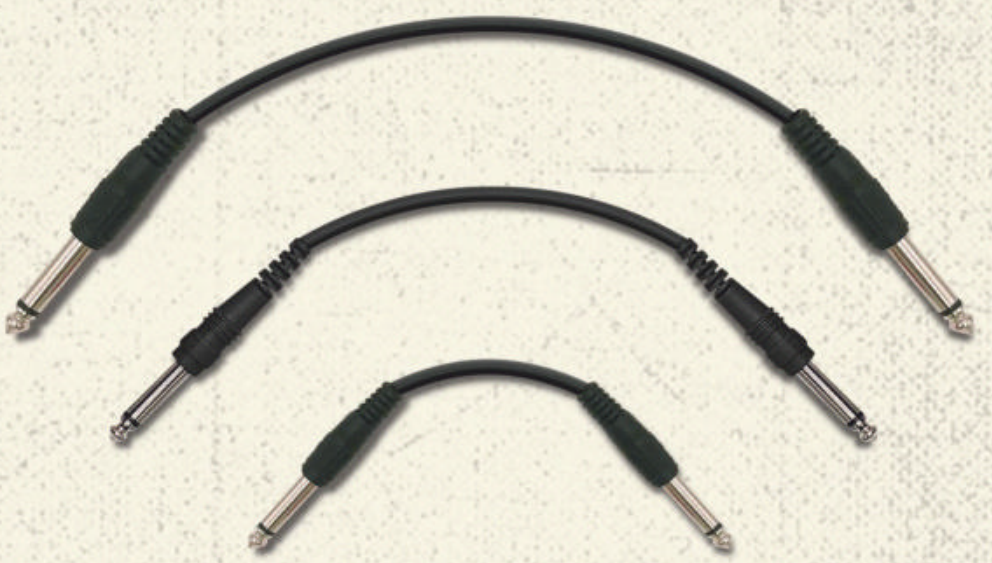
The main amp food groups are all included here. The presets reference the sounds of a '65 Twin plus a compressor, a '65 Deluxe, a tweed Twin, a Vox AC30, a '65 Deluxe driven by an Ibanez TS808 Tube Screamer, a Marshall Super Lead, a Mesa Dual Rectifier, a Fender Bassbreaker, Friedman BE-100 and a Bogner Uberschall. Effects include room, hall and spring reverbs, both plain and modulated, as well as a few delays and modulators. Kudos to Fender for ensuring that the options are all musical sounding and useful.

I found the sounds fun to use and similar to the experience of playing through an amp, with respect to response to touch and guitar volume control clean-up. The unit worked well through headphones, but I preferred playing through my DAW. For maximum comfort, I recommend adding an extension to

the supplied short USB cable. Latency was negligible when using my UA Arrow interface as the output to my studio monitors.

I was happy to discover that I could also plug the Mustang Micro into the output of my pedalboard, where it responded like an actual amp when driven by analog overdrive and fuzz pedals. A little post Micro EQ was required to match the tone of plugging directly into the guitar, but it was worth it for the easy access to my analog effects.

Whether you use the Fender Mustang Micro as a practice tool, for playing along with tunes streaming via Bluetooth, or as a quick and easy audio interface for recording your guitar, prepare to be amazed at the level of feel and tone Fender has crammed into this tiny package. Does it sound as good as dedicated modeling software or large hardware multi-effects costing many times more? Not quite, but it is nevertheless a miracle of modern engineering and deserves an Editors' Pick Award.



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MACKIE

Thrash215 Powered Loudspeaker

TESTED BY ANDY McDONOUGH

SINCE THE 1990S Mackie, a company founded in America's rugged Northwest, has been designing great-sounding and reliable audio products for musicians. A good part of their success can be attributed to the thoughtful design of mixers and loudspeakers that deliver both professional quality and portability. With the debut of their new line of Thrash-powered loudspeakers, Mackie has attempted to address perhaps the most challenging constraint to producing great audio — doing it on a budget. Thrash promises more for a fraction of what other professional powered loudspeakers cost.

I tested the Thrash215 against Mackie's claim that this entry-level powered speaker could function as a good P.A. for solo/duo performance or as a monitor, with enough power for a small- or medium-sized gig. Since I was performing, I was concerned enough about the quality of an entry-level loudspeaker to pack along my usual P.A., just in case. Spoiler alert: It never came out of my car.

My first observations had to do with getting the Thrash215 to the gig. This might seem trivial, but if you do a lot of gigs, how equipment handles can make all the difference. At just over 40 pounds, the Thrash215's cabinet design is lightweight but does not seem at all fragile. Its solid, durable construction is immediately obvious, but the most striking feature — and one of the most useful — is the number, size and location of the embedded handles. There seems to be one everywhere you need it, including oversized, bar-like handles located at the back of both the top and bottom, where you need them most. For transporting the speaker or taking advantage of the cabinet's dual-angled sides to use it as a floor wedge, side handles provide both good balance and comfort. A standard pole mount is available at the bottom that has "feet" to protect both the speaker and floor.

Gain controls on the rear let you adjust the input sensitivity for line and mic sources.

Some features of the Thrash215 are hidden on a back panel that provides all the connectivity and control options. You might say that its best feature for many beginning performers is its lack of features, making this powered speaker dead simple to operate. There are no options for multiple EQ curves or input type switches. It has two dual XLR/TRS combo inputs to accept both ¼-inch or XLR cables, gain controls for those inputs and a main volume control. It's designed to set up, plug in and play. The inputs accept a very wide range of sources, so the channel gains are marked for "U"(unity gain) at the middle of the range but also "line" and "mic," to give you some approximate starting levels. I noticed that the gain rises very rapidly as you move past mic, so this speaker will handle just about any input you want to use. The one output on the back panel is an XLR, handy for either daisy-chaining more Thrash215s for better coverage or as monitors.

The first half of my gig went well with the Thrash215 on a stand. With a little adjustment of the guitar's EQ to keep it from being "boomy," the speaker provided more than enough power and a very clear, full-range sound. The room was pretty lively, so any effects I might have added for vocals would have been minimal. The Thrash215 did a good job for vocals in this solo performer configuration, even without the benefits of an external mixer. I did find myself singing a bit "off-mic" occasionally as the 15-inch woofer, coupled with Mackie's smart cabinet design, provides a significant amount of bottom end. A simple mixer would have tuned the system in perfectly for this gig, but it was easily doable with the Thrash215's gain controls.

SPECIFICATIONS

Thrash215 Powered Speaker
CONTACT mackie.com
PRICE $349

POWERED Yes
POWER CONFIGURATION Single Amp
LF DRIVER 15" woofer
HF DRIVER 1" Titanium compression
TOTAL POWER 1,300W Class D
INPUTS 2 x XLR-1/4" combo
OUTPUTS1 x XLR (mix)
FREQUENCY RESPONSE 38Hz-20kHz (-10dB)
MAXIMUM PEAK SPL 126 dB SPL @ 1m
MOUNTING OPTIONS Pole, Floor Wedge
POWER SOURCE Standard IEC AC cable
DIMENSIONS 28" x 17.1" x 14.3"
WEIGHT 40.78 lbs.
BUILT China

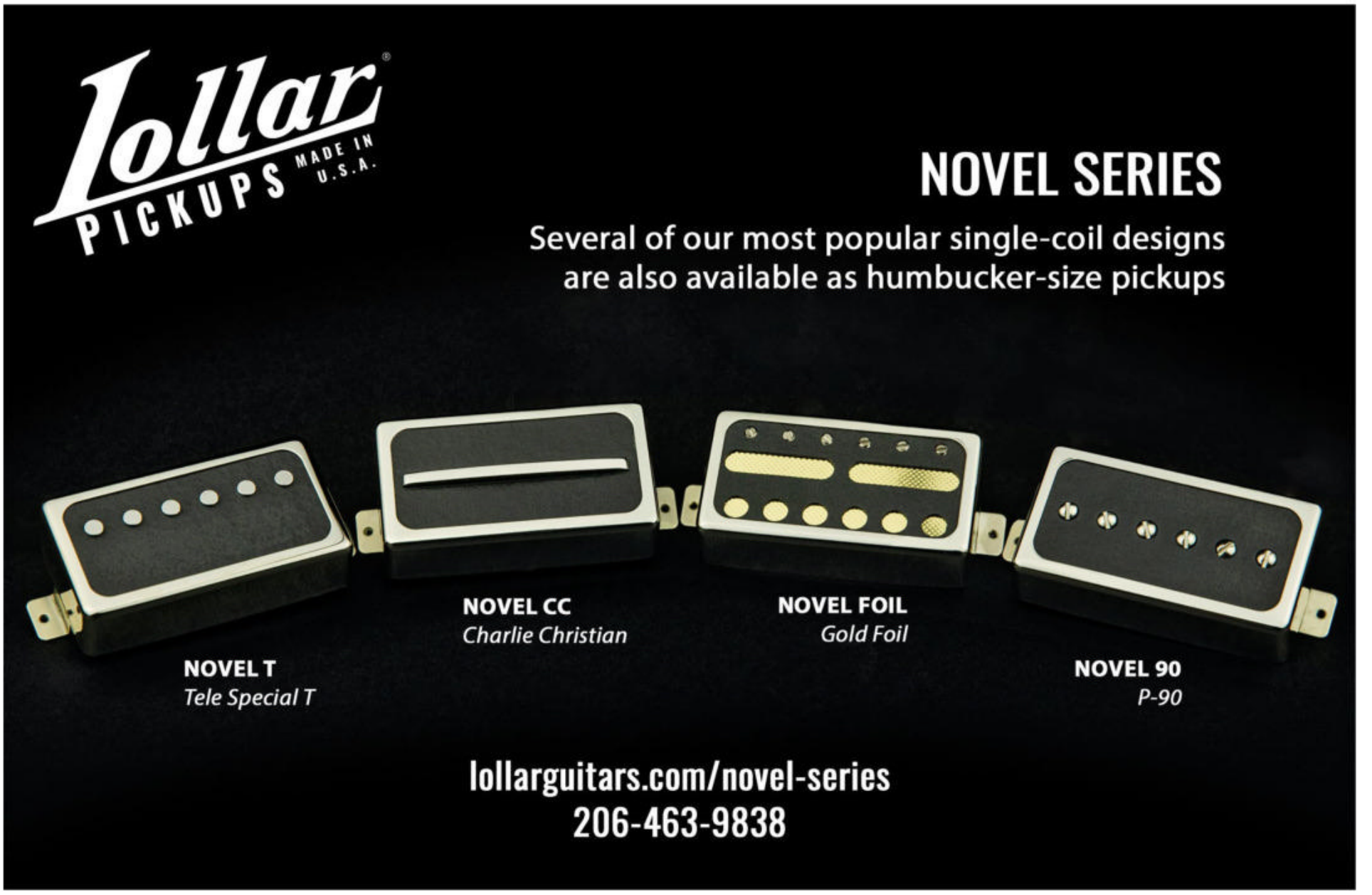
KUDOS Full-range sound, easy to set up and use, great value
CONCERNS No EQ or effects

It's worth mentioning that Mackie has always done a great job with its manuals. Understanding that manual reading is not for everyone, the manual for the Thrash is short and to the point. It provides great illustrations of how to set up the speakers in different configurations, including in larger situations, where you could add Mackie's Thump subs or the SR18s from the SRT series.

For the second half of the evening, I set up the Thrash215 as a monitor for the band. Again, it was a simple setup, dialing in a good level, with our mixer's monitor output going to channel one of the Thrash. I followed the indications on the gain control to match a line input, and setup was done. The Thrash215 had more than enough power from its 1,300-watt class-d amplifier to keep up with a band containing keyboards, drums and bass, and it showed no sign of distortion or clipping.

For me, the Thrash215's standout feature, aside from its obvious ease of use, is the full-range sound coming from the combination of a powerful amplifier, high-performance woofers, titanium compression drivers and a great cabinet design. There's obviously more to it, including Mackie's high- and low-frequency equalization, dynamic bass boosting, compression, limiting and thermal protection. The result is that this speaker, unlike other powered speakers that lack bottom end or have brittle highs — either of which can distract audiences from a performance — succeeds in a serious attempt to stay true to the source. Plus, these speakers clearly have the potential to get really loud when the occasion calls for it.

For this review, I've avoided the phrase "for the money" because I feel it doesn't really matter when you're trying to make your music sound its best. But at just $349 for the Thrash215 (or $299 for a Thrash212 with a 12-inch woofer), it's hard not to consider price to be one of this product's best features. Are there more expensive, bi-amped speakers that offer a tighter bass response, better transitions across the audio spectrum, and better definition? Yes. But with Mackie's Thrash215 offered at these price points, anyone can afford a responsible sound system, even players who are just starting out.



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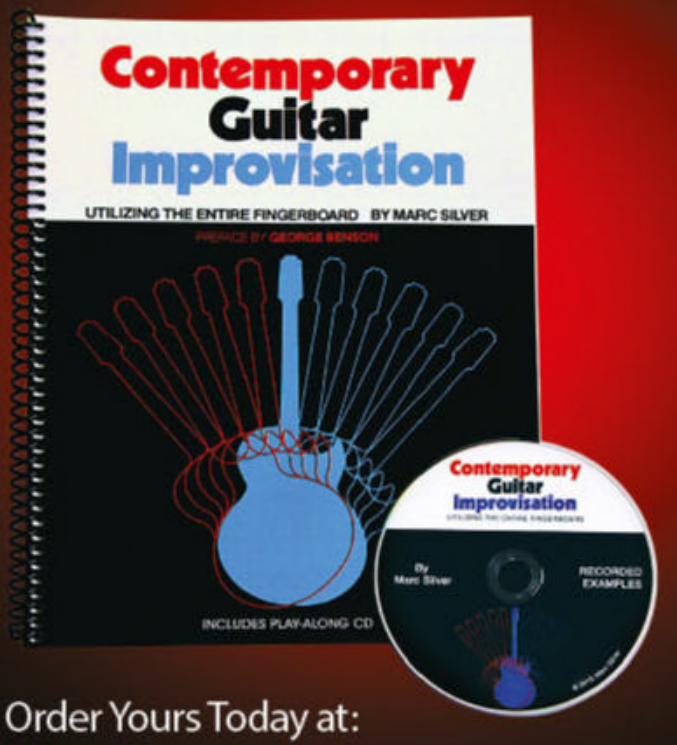

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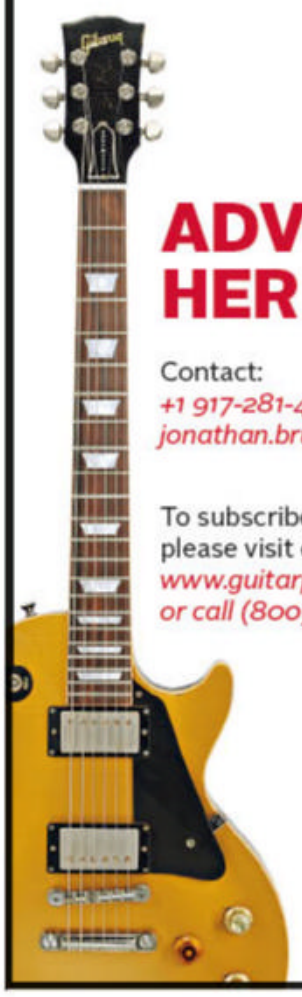
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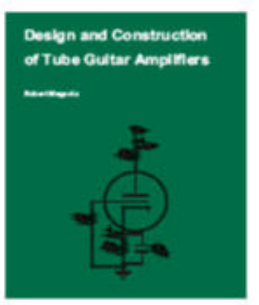

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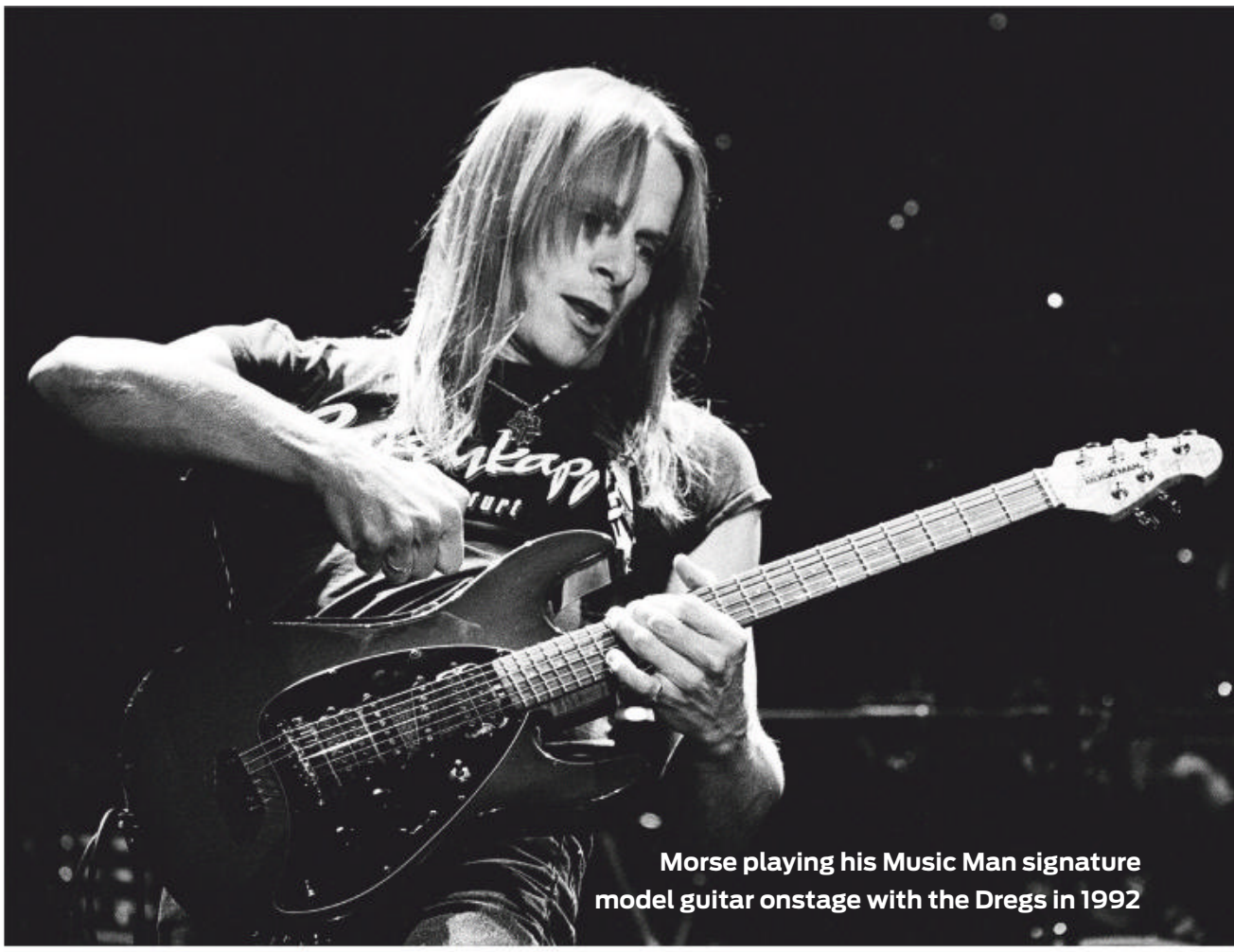

Morse playing his Music Man signature model guitar onstage with the Dregs in 1992

How I Wrote...

"Take It Off the Top"

Steve Morse opens up about the Dixie Dregs' long-running fan favorite.

BY JOE BOSSO

"A LOT OF our songs are very complicated, but this is one of our most straightforward tunes," says Steve Morse, speaking about "Take It Off the Top," the high-octane, fun and frisky prog-rock instrumental that kicked off the Dixie Dregs' second album, 1978's *What If*. "At the time, our road manager said to us, 'It's good to finally hear you play straight-up rock and roll for a change.' I was trying to be as to the point as possible, but leave it to me to throw in a bunch of stuff that destroyed any chance at commercial success."

Even though *What If* failed to ascend higher than number 182 on the *Billboard* Hot 100, "Take It Off the Top" became an instant favorite among Dixie Dregs devotees. As Morse notes, "My style is what it is. I'll go along for a few bars, but then I'll veer off into jazz or classical. It kept us off the charts, but it won us fans who stayed with us."

SCIENCE FRICTION

Soon after the release of the Dregs' 1977 debut album, *Free Fall*, Morse started tinkering with a sparkly, pinch-harmonic riff that he hoped would grow into a song. "I went over to my friend [*Allman Brothers keyboardist*] Chuck Leavell's house to see if we could write something," he says. "We didn't get past what I had, though he did add a bit of comping to it. It started out really rock — my love of Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck — but I began to add a bunch of contrapuntal elements to the bridge. My jazz side was coming through."

Gradually, Morse worked up enough of a melody over a chord pattern to call it a song, but he would only show it to the rest of the band a few sections at a time. "As soon as they got a part down, I would change it," he says. "I was like a mad scientist, always refining. They would get mad at me: 'Didn't you just show that to us in C sharp?' And I'd be like, 'Yeah, but it's better now. Trust me.'"

GREAT SCOTT

For *What If*, the band sought out celebrated producer/engineer Ken Scott, not so much for his work with the Beatles or David Bowie but because of his production of the Mahavishnu Orchestra. "Those guys were our heroes," Morse says, "so we were eager to work with Ken. We felt like we were graduating to the next level."

At L.A.'s Chateau Recorders, the band ran down a few takes of "Take It Off the Top," none of them varying too much from the arrangement they had been playing live. "The only things that kept changing were my solos, which I overdubbed," Morse says. "Ken was great about letting me try out whatever I wanted." The guitarist also raves about Scott's sonic skills. "He introduced us to distant miking and different ways of getting reverb — things we knew nothing about," Morse says. "We put my guitar amp in a bathroom. I'd never tried that. Everything Ken did was incredible. Suddenly, the guitar and drums sounded huge."

"WE PUT MY GUITAR AMP IN A BATHROOM. I'D NEVER TRIED THAT. EVERYTHING KEN DID WAS INCREDIBLE"

LOVE FROM ENGLAND

Morse remembers the response from Capricorn Records, the band's label, as being positive, but radio programmers just wouldn't bite. "It was just too progressive for everybody at the time," he says. Things weren't much better in the U.K. "*Melody Maker* wrote 'Take it off... please,'" Morse recalls. "That was the entirety of their review, and it pretty much sealed our fate in England for a while."

The band did find one fan in the U.K., however — disc jockey Tommy Vance, host of the popular BBC Radio 1 *Friday Rock Show*. Vance used "Take It Off the Top" as his theme song during the show's run, from 1978 to 1993. "That was a nice surprise," Morse reveals. "We found out about it after the fact." He laughs. "If there were royalties from it, they must have gone somewhere. They didn't go to me."

Nonetheless, "Take It Off the Top" remained a staple of the Dregs' live performances for years. The only times it wouldn't be in the set was when the band played an earlier rocker, "Cruise Control." "The two songs sort of sat in the same lane, and we always tried to have a lot of variety in the set list," Morse explains. "But the fans always loved it, and we had a great time playing it. Sometimes we would throw in bits of other songs, like 'Mississippi Queen.' I have a lot of fond memories of those gigs."

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